JOHN SUNG:
CHRISTIAN REVITALIZATION IN CHINA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

2015
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DEDICATION

To Cisca, who listened, laughed, and labored alongside me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Typing has been a solitary affair, but writing has never been so. This dissertation has been enriched by the input of various guides, advocates, interlocutors, and assistants. My joy is to thank some of the most prominent for their generosity, and to acknowledge the valuable contributions they made to understanding John Sung.

At Boston University, Dana Robert has been an extraordinary advisor. She knew when to push me to think harder, and when I needed to let something sit. The comments she made on various drafts of this document repeatedly broadened the context of my work and deepened the analysis. I am also indebted to Margaret Bendroth, who took an early version of the first chapter and used it to teach me how to write better. Christopher Evans, my second reader, offered to support this project early on, and then did so by acting as both a cheerleader and a wise sage. The graduate students committed to Asian Christianity helped me refine several parts of this dissertation. I am grateful for the ideas that Yeonseung Lee, David Scott, Eva Pascal, Hye Jin Lee, Michel Chambon, Jeremy Hegi, and Soojin Chung contributed. I also owe thanks to Kara Jackman for all the treasures she turned up in the School of Theology archive, and Stacey Battles De Ramos for making hard-to-find books appear at Boston University.

The university not only supplied intellectual companions, but gave me valuable financial support as well. The Center for Global Christianity & Mission helped fund a trip to Asia, as well as co-sponsoring a second trip that was subsidized by the School of
Theology’s Springboard Funding. The sources from Europe and Asia that appear in this
document would not have been possible without the financial support of the university.

In Edinburgh, Brian Stanley opened the Andrew F. Walls library for me even
though it was supposed to be closed. In the Netherlands, Cornelis van der Laan sent me
all the issues of the Pentecostal periodical *Gouden Schoven* in which John Sung was
mentioned. Meanwhile, Huub Lems of the Mission Foundation of the Protestant Church
in the Netherlands, granted me access to a wide range of mission files stored in the
Utrecht Archive. I owe each of them a heart-felt thanks for enriching the documentary
history of John Sung.

In Hong Kong, Irene Wong and Mandy Liu worked tirelessly to track down a
variety of sources on John Sung housed at the Hong Kong Baptist University. Siu Chao
Lee of Bethel helped me find historical records from the mission. I thank them all.

In Singapore, I accumulated numerous debts. I enjoyed the hospitality and
insights of Michael Nai-Chiu Poon at Trinity Theological College. He opened up the
world of John Sung’s ministry on that island for me. He was assisted by Michael
Mukunthun, the school’s librarian, and his colleague Eunice Low. I must especially
acknowledge the efforts of the Methodist Bishop, Hwa Yung. He worked diligently to
make sure that I could use Sung’s diaries while I was in Singapore. Several others from
Singapore made significant contributions to this study, including Wong Siew Yun from
the Chin Lien Bible School, Ernest Lau of the Methodist Archive, and Lieu Heng San and Teek Being Yeo from the Telok Ayer Methodist Church.

One of the most delightful trips was to Sibu, Malaysia where Francis Wong, Wong Meng Lei, Tie King Tai, Thomas Lau, and Su Chii Ann collaborated to unearth an enormous collection of Sung material before I even arrived. It was a joy to spend a week with others who were as interested in Sung as I was.

In China, Zheng Jincan made important introductions and provided tours of the area where John Sung had grown up. He was most generous with his time and knowledge.

In the United States, I had the enormous benefit of working with enthusiastic and wise archivists. Ruth Tonkiss Cameron of the Union Theological Seminary archives, Meri Jansen from the Church of the Nazarene archives, Marisa Louie of the National Archives in San Francisco, Kevin Haire from the Ohio State University archives, Geoffrey Reynolds of the Joint Archives of Holland Michigan, Dale Patterson and Chris Anderson of the United Methodist Archives and History Center, and Martha Smalley of the Yale Divinity School Library are particularly important to single out. Each one went an extra mile (or three) to dig up scattered materials about John Sung.

Finally, I need to thank friends and family. Kao ChaoLuan invested an enormous amount of time in helping me to polish up my Chinese. Jessica Williams [Ding Huijun] became the world’s foremost authority on deciphering John Sung’s almost illegible
scrawl that he scratched into his diaries. She spent hundreds of hours and suffered through countless headaches as she helped me make out which characters Sung was using. Truly, this dissertation could not have happened without her work of transliteration. My family similarly made heroic efforts to help me complete this project. My father, Herb Ireland, traveled with me through three continents and seven countries to collect information on Sung. He was a buoyant companion, and a stalwart supporter. Not do be outdone, my mother, Carolyn Ireland, helped comb through and organize the piles of material that I gathered in Europe and Asia. My wife and son, however, were the ones who worked with me on John Sung not for weeks at a time, but for years. Whether I was happy, frustrated, or exhausted, they let me spill it all out over lunch and dinner. Their patience and questions birthed some of the sharpest insights. Thank you Cisca and Alexander. Along with the others mentioned, we did this together!
This dissertation examines the powerful vortex of John Sung’s revivals in China and Southeast Asia, which directly influenced ten percent of all Chinese Protestants by the end of the 1930s. It begins in 1926 with his decision to pursue theological education in the United States, and ends with his physical collapse in 1940. But the work is not focused on biographical details; it is primarily concerned with how Sung’s ministry evolved. Contrary to the numerous biographies on Sung that circulate in multiple languages, he did not return to China as a newly born-again believer enthusiastic to call the nation to repentance. Instead, this work demonstrates that Sung first floundered in China, spending several years piecing together his conversion narrative, and he adopted the revivalism that made him famous only after joining the Shanghai Bethel Mission in 1931. Once those pieces fit together, however, Sung became the preeminent Chinese evangelist of the twentieth century.
The dissertation uses archival material and unrestricted access to Sung’s own diaries not only to reconstruct the transformations within Sung’s ministry, but also to make new dimensions of his work accessible. Particular attention is given to class, women, and divine healing. Sung’s revivals appealed to the xiaoshimin, or China’s petty urbanites, who sought a modern spirituality that befit their urban lives, yet wanted a religious system that addressed their traditional concerns. Women appeared at Sung’s revivals in disproportionate numbers, because in China and Southeast Asia revivalism and modernity fueled one another, and women could use that combustible mix to cast new places for themselves in local societies—even if it meant challenging Sung’s own perception of women. Sung’s practice of healing, derived from the holiness movement, temporarily challenged China’s medical pluralism, before eventually becoming part of it.

Analysis of Sung’s ministry suggests that revivalism was a powerful tool for personal and social revitalization. Through it, Sung not only rebuilt his own life and ministry, but he also used revivalism to recreate a distinctively Chinese spirituality, though now Christianized and expressed in ways appropriate to China and Southeast Asia’s modernizing cities.
CONTENTS

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................................................ iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................................................................................... v

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ ix

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter

1. JOHN SUNG’S MALLEABLE CONVERSION .................................................................................. 18
   The Chaos of the Experience in New York .................................................................................. 21
   Multiple Meanings ..................................................................................................................... 40
   The Construction of the Experience in New York .................................................................. 43
   The Co-option of the Experience in New York ....................................................................... 64
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 75

2. TO PREACH THE GOSPEL ........................................................................................................ 77
   Learning How to Preach ............................................................................................................. 79
      The First Years in China ........................................................................................................ 79
      A Curator of Divine Mysteries .............................................................................................. 85
      A Second Conversion: Finding a New Way to Preach .......................................................... 94
   A Glocal Revivalist .................................................................................................................. 106
      Revival as a Performance ...................................................................................................... 108
      Authority to Preach .............................................................................................................. 114
      Stock Material ....................................................................................................................... 122
      A Glocal Story Teller ............................................................................................................ 135
      The End of the World ............................................................................................................ 137
   Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 150

3. CLASS AND CONVERSION......................................................................................................... 152
   Going Solo .................................................................................................................................. 152
      Circumscribed by the City ...................................................................................................... 157
      The Example of Tianjin .......................................................................................................... 160
   An Urban Gospel of Conservative Modernization ................................................................. 164
      Bourgeois Backers ................................................................................................................ 164
      Sung’s Association with China’s Elite ................................................................................... 169
      Echoes of a Broader Discourse ........................................................................................... 176
   Revival and Class Composition ............................................................................................... 184
      The Underclass ...................................................................................................................... 183
The Xiaoshimin .......................................................................................... 188
Why the Xiaoshimin? ............................................................................. 194
Petty Urbanite Anxieties ...................................................................... 194
A Safe Home ......................................................................................... 204
A Reconstituted Morality ...................................................................... 211
A Clash Over Converts ......................................................................... 220
Conclusion ............................................................................................ 226

4. MODERNIZING WOMEN ....................................................................... 228
   From a Minority to a Majority ............................................................. 229
   Born Again, Born into Modernity ....................................................... 232
   John Sung’s Messages: A Two-Edged Sword ................................. 232
   Immigration and Salvation ................................................................. 238
   A Modernizing Religion .................................................................. 243
   The Double Bind of Gender Expectations ....................................... 246
   Saved to Serve .................................................................................. 248
   Piety ................................................................................................... 249
   Public Appearances ........................................................................... 252
   Preaching and Teaching ................................................................... 253
   Evangelism ......................................................................................... 255
   Legacy ................................................................................................ 258
   Conclusion ......................................................................................... 258

5. INDIGENIZATION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF JOHN SUNG’S
   HEALING MINISTRY ........................................................................... 263
   The Healing Arts in Republican China ............................................. 265
   Western Biomedicine ....................................................................... 265
   Chinese Medicine ............................................................................. 271
   Medical Alternatives ....................................................................... 276
   The Influences on John Sung’s Healing Ministry ............................ 283
   Medical Pluralism ............................................................................ 283
   The Holiness Movement and Divine Healing .................................... 287
   Chinese Christian Spirituality .......................................................... 292
   Commercialism, Nationalism, Beauty, and Strength ...................... 293
   Sung’s work of Healing .................................................................... 297
   The Beginning .................................................................................. 297
   The Prominence of Healing ............................................................... 301
   The Theology of Healing ................................................................ 304
   The Practice of Healing ................................................................... 308
   Enabling the Disabled ...................................................................... 312
   The Narratives of Healing ................................................................ 317
   The Question of Indigenization ....................................................... 322
   Sick Unto Death ................................................................................. 330
INTRODUCTION

The Chinese revivalist John Sung knew how to shock an audience. In the midst of a sermon on Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, he pulled out a small casket—a ritually unclean object—and waived it about with impunity. He taunted his audience that their hearts were like tombs, filled with the stink of rotten sin. “No! Don’t open it!” he parodied those obviously aghast by his frank disregard of propriety, “It will smell!” But open it he did. Sinking his hand into the casket, he pulled forth a strip of cloth, and dramatized his disgust as he dangled it before everyone’s eyes, “Oh! The first stink… hatred.” He warned the audience about the seductive power of hatred, and then leveled his heavy stare on the crowd. “Who has committed this sin?” Eyes dropped down, hoping to avoid Sung’s notice, while a charged and uncomfortable silence filled the hall. Sung pressed on determinedly: “Do you hate? Father, mother, brother, sister, teachers, grandmother, daughter-in-law, husband, wife, friend, children, fellow workers, students?

1 In 1927, 宋尚節 declared that God had given him the English name, “John.” Since that time, English readers have known the subject of this dissertation as John Sung. He will be referred to as such throughout this dissertation, except in the first chapter when it would be anachronistic to use an English name. Sung never went by “Yuehan [John]” in China or when he traveled through Southeast Asia. He always retained his given name. That Chinese name will appear in this dissertation in two Romanized forms. The first will appear in the text of chapter 1. When Sung studied in the United States, he spelled his name as Sung Siong Ceh. The second Romanized form will appear in the footnotes and the bibliography. All works written by John Sung in Chinese will be cited using pinyin, wherein John Sung’s name is transliterated as Song Shangjie.

2 Emily M. Ahern, “The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women,” in Women in Chinese Society, edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975). Death was considered to be powerfully polluting. Those touched by it, according to custom, were not even allowed to worship traditional Chinese deities. To bring death into the place of worship, even symbolically as Sung did, was provocative and upsetting.
Do you hate in your heart? Do you hate to the very bone? He paused, waiting, waiting, until finally someone indicated she was afflicted by hatred. Then another, and another raised her hand in confession. On and on it went, women and men weeping in repentance, until Sung was satisfied that hatred had been fully disgorged. Then he thrust his hand back into the box and drew out another cloth: “Visiting brothels! Who has committed this sin?”

Western missionaries, who observed Sung go on to remove thirty to forty more strips from the coffin and demand to know who perpetrated each sin, were overwhelmed by the Chinese response. Some saw it as a Chinese Pentecost, likening the cries of confession to the wind that shook the room in which the apostles gathered. They were jubilant that the Chinese were finally experiencing divine deliverance as people did back in the United States. Others were distressed by the enthusiasm and feared psychological

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4 Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji [Revival Messages]* (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1989), 76; and, Song Shangjie, “Xiangwo chuilingqi [May the Spirit Breathe on Me],” *Budao zazhi [Evangelism]* 8, no. 3 (May-June 1935): 10-14.


6 Reporting on one revival, Nazarene missionary A. J. Smith wrote, “It is a second Pentecost indeed. Confessions have been made, strong men have yielded themselves as instruments in the hands of the Holy Ghost, and with tears streaming down their faces, praying and weeping such as I never heard from the lips of Chinese or any other moral, telling of their wonderful experiences and how they have been baptized with the Holy Ghost and fire.... The Chinese are naturally not shouters. They are very quiet and reserved. But, praise God, when the Holy Ghost fire strikes them they shout and praise God with loud voices like folks in America when they get the blessing.” A. J. Smith, “Holy Ghost Revival at Tamingfu,” *The Other Sheep* (February 1927): 6.
manipulation. All, however, seemed to agree that what they were witnessing was unusual. Such powerful and emotional responses among people they presumed to be reserved, caused one missionary after another to express a kind of disbelief: “[This] cannot be done according to Oriental habits and opinions.”

But between 1928 and 1940 these kinds of dramatic conversions did happen, and they occurred among tens of thousands of Chinese. As John Sung relentlessly moved through Asia, preaching almost without ceasing, approximately 100,000 people prayed for new spiritual life at his revival meetings—a staggering figure that represents more than ten percent of all Chinese Protestants in the region. Why did Sung elicit such exceptionally strong reactions from Christians in China and Southeast Asia?

This dissertation shows how John Sung crafted his ministry and adapted his message, so that a significant proportion of Chinese believers could express their faith in ways that were relevant to their changing lives. Modern revivals were unknown in China before 1900, but within twenty-five years of their initial and sporadic outbursts, Sung

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7 W. A. Busby to Mr. T. Cocker Brown, March 26, 1935, Council for World Mission Archives, Fukien, Correspondence Files (in/out), 1928-1939, Box 15-19, (H-2137), Zug, 1978, Box no. 18-1934/36, BUS-DUN, no. 254, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.


9 Lian Xi, Redeemed by Fire, 10. See also: Joseph Parker, Interpretive Statistical Survey of the World Mission of the Christian Church: Summary and Detailed Statistics of Churches and Missionary Societies, Interpretive Articles, and Indices (New York, London: International Missionary Council, 1938), 19-20. The number of Chinese Protestants living in China and Southeast Asia is very difficult to establish, because statistical tables did not distinguish among ethnicities. Parker counts 567,390 Protestants in China/Manchuria, and 982,761 in all the countries Sung visited in Southeast Asia. That would mean of the 1,550,151 Protestants in the region, 6.5% converted through Sung’s ministry. However, unless one assumes that the 982,761 Protestants living in British Malaya, Burma, Formosa, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Siam were all ethnically Chinese—which they clearly were not, then it seems reasonable to conclude that Sung was instrumental in at least 10% of Chinese Protestants in the region.
reigned as “the single most powerful figure in Chinese revivalism.” He used revivalism as a tool for personal and social revitalization. Through it, Sung not only rebuilt his own life and ministry, but he also harnessed revivalism to recreate a distinctly Chinese spirituality, though now Christianized and expressed in ways appropriate to China and Southeast Asia’s modernizing cities. By explaining how his revivalism evolved and functioned, one not only comes to understand Sung, a central figure in Chinese Christian history, but one also catches a rare glimpse into the lives of the hundreds of thousands of people who gathered to hear him preach.

Hagiography and Historiography

The sheer number of converts attributed to John Sung has made him an important figure in Chinese Christianity, but reliable historical research on him and his ministry has been scant. That does not mean material about Sung is not circulating. Several hagiographies exist. The most famous, Leslie Lyall’s John Sung, has been printed at

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11 Sung’s revivalism has flourished in China. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) estimate that 95,316,000 renewalists now live in China. By no means are these all spiritual descendents of Sung’s ministry, but their Christianity bears the marks of his revivalism. See, for example, Yalin Xin, who in his book Inside China’s House Church Network: The Word of Life Movement and Its Renewing Dynamic (Lexington, KY: Enoch Press, 2009), named John Sung as a progenitor of one of the largest renewalist movements in contemporary China.


least twenty times and in eight different languages. However, as I have shown elsewhere, Lyall’s book and the other hagiographies tell at least as much about their own Sitz im Leben as they do about Sung. While acting as a repository of important dates and events, the books do not critically examine Sung or his ministry, nor do they provide much perspective on the Chinese Christianity of the time.

In fact, until recently, Sung failed to receive any scholarly attention. In the wake of the Chinese Revolution of 1949, scholars who examined Chinese Christianity did so in order to determine its relationship to the massive social and political changes associated with the communists. For instance, in the 1960s James Thomson wrote about the tragic flaw in Christian missions in While China Faced West: American Reformers in Nationalist China. He explained that earnest Christians saw the dire need to transform the Chinese countryside, but they were ultimately constrained by their understanding of the gospel. Whereas political revolutionaries redistributed land at the end of a gun’s barrel, progressive Christians could only rely on persuasion. The communist revolution, he concluded, outran Christianity’s incremental reforms. Roughly twenty-five years later, Jun Xing continued to tease out the important connections between Christianity and radical social change. In Baptized in the Fire of Revolution: The American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China, 1919-1937, Jun described how the Y helped to inaugurate and

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In the same year that Jun published his careful analysis of the YMCA and social reform, Daniel H. Bays edited a volume on \textit{Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present}.\footnote{Daniel H. Bays, \textit{Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present} (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996).} The book signaled a change in historiography. No longer writing in the shadow of the Chinese Revolution, Bays spoke in light of the dawning realization that Chinese Christianity was thriving. He shifted the focus from progressive Christian institutions and churches that advocated social change but failed to revolutionize China, to Chinese Protestants who, in the years before 1949, were already “independent of foreign missions, autonomous in operations, and indigenous in ideas and...
leadership.” Based on “what we know of the churches in China today,” he argued, indigenous Christian movements were the most important development in Chinese churches during the early twentieth century. In six brief pages, Bays highlighted several examples of the type of independent Protestant Christianity he was describing, and included a short biography of John Sung. Subsequent scholarship has followed Bays’s lead, and focused on indigenous figures and movements, heralding them as the progenitors of contemporary Chinese Christianity. But only in 2010 did Sung receive his first in-depth scholarly treatment. In Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China, Lian Xi expanded Bays’s list of independent movements and Christians into a full-length book. He devoted not paragraphs but whole chapters to


21 Bays, 310.


23 Ka-Tong Lim’s, “The Life and Ministry of John Sung: Sowing Seeds of Vibrant Christianity in Asian Soil,” (Ph.D. diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2009) actually came out in 2009, a few months before the work of Lian Xi in 2010. The trajectory of Lim’s dissertation, however, is different from the historiographical tradition described above. Lim wrote the best biography available on Sung, but not as an exercise in describing the historical rise of Chinese independent Christianity. Instead, he described Sung for missiological purposes. Sung, Lim argued, illustrated the ministry of a person who took seriously what Paul Hiebert called the “excluded-middle,” and the dissertation acted as an example of what Ruth A. Tucker called “biography as missiology.” The biographical material he pieced together is very useful, though it lacks historical analysis of Sung’s ministry. Additionally, it is subject to the same limitations regarding sources as ascribed to Lian Xi’s work below.

24 Lian Xi, Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).
each type of indigenous Christianity Bays first described. While the advance is most welcome, three issues in Lian Xi’s work demand a fuller account of Sung’s life and ministry. First, Lian devoted only one chapter to John Sung. By virtue of its size, his study could only describe Sung in broad strokes. It could not do an in-depth study of how Sung formed his ministry, or what that communicated about Chinese Christianity.

Second, a perusal of his sources points to a deeper problem. Lian Xi’s chapter remained deeply indebted to Sung’s own works but, as has since been demonstrated elsewhere, Sung is not a reliable source. I have shown that his autobiography *Wode jianzheng* [My Testimony] is prone to distortion, exaggeration and error. Michael Nai-chiu Poon has made a convincing case that Sung’s posthumously published diary, *Lingli jiguang* [Gleanings of my Spiritual Experience], was heavily edited by his daughter, and further compromised by material from hagiographic sources being intermixed with Sung’s own writing without any demarcation between the two. Third, as his subtitle suggested, Lian Xi focused on *Popular Christianity in Modern China*. That phrase limited his research on John Sung in two critical ways. The first half of the phrase, “Popular Christianity,” associated Sung with other indigenous movements that operated free of Western influence. But that angle on his ministry had limited value, for Sung depended on mission churches. He spoke almost exclusively in them, and was even ordained in the Methodist

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25 Ireland, “John Sung’s Malleable Conversion Narrative.”

Episcopal Church. The second half of the phrase caused Lian to concentrate on “Modern China,” and thereby omit virtually any reference to Sung’s two years of ministry outside of the mainland.

Perhaps for these very reasons, a new historiographical turn in studies of Chinese Christianity is underway. Peter Tze Ming Ng describes it as a global-local perspective. Although Ng’s particular methodological framework is underdeveloped, I believe that a global-local angle can move research beyond reigning dichotomies (indigenous/foreign) and narrow geographic definitions of Chinese Christianity. It is therefore in that vein that I propose to study Sung and his ministry as embedded in transnational networks and ideas.

**Sources and Method**

In March 2010, I traveled to Union Theological Seminary in New York. John Sung studied there just over one semester in 1926-27, before UTS authorities sent him to Bloomingdale Hospital, a mental asylum in White Plains, New York. The trip promised little reward for my research. I had been informed before I went to New York that Union kept no records on him, or others who did not graduate. But when I arrived and found that UTS had been able to piece together a folder of Sung’s records, I was pleasantly surprised, and then plainly shocked. The sizeable collection of materials from 1926-1932

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27 Peter Tze Ming Ng, *Chinese Christianity: An Interplay between Global and Local Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

provided a picture of Sung that challenged prevailing interpretations of his conversion and call to ministry. Deeper still, the new materials demonstrated Sung’s proclivity to exaggerate, fabricate, or silence events for rhetorical effect. For the first time it became clear that Sung’s own publications and sermons, which heretofore had been the basis for all the research on John Sung, were compromised sources. They could not be taken at face value.

That gap between Sung’s published works and the archival material at Union Theological Seminary inspired me to explore other archival collections. Befitting research of a peripatetic preacher, my investigation pushed me to travel to seven nations spread across three continents. In the United States I worked with numerous archives, and found materials in: the Boston University School of Theology archives; the Harvard Yenching Library; the National Archive in San Francisco; the archives at Ohio Wesleyan University and Ohio State University; the Medical Center Archives of New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell; the Special Collections at the Yale Divinity School Library; the archives of the Church of the Nazarene in Kansas City, Missouri; the Billy Graham archives of Wheaton College, Illinois; the Joint Archives of Holland, Michigan; the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archives at the Houghton Library of Harvard University; Midwest China Oral History and Archives Collection housed in St. Paul, Minnesota; the Cornell University Asian Collection, New York; and the United Methodist Archives and History Center in Madison, New Jersey. In addition, I used the Internet archives of the Christian Missionary and Alliance and of the Assemblies
of God. In Europe, I spent time collecting materials from: the Andrew F. Walls Library of
the University of Edinburgh; the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam; and Stichting de
Zending der Protestantse Kerk in Nederland [The Mission Foundation of the Protestant
Church in the Netherlands], which has placed its extensive collections in the Utrecht
Archive. Research in Asia turned up significant materials from: the Singapore National
Archive; the National Library of Singapore; the Singapore Methodist Archive; the
Singapore Bible College Library; Chin Lien Seminary in Singapore; Trinity Theological
College in Singapore; the Archives on the History of Christianity in China at Hong Kong
Baptist University; the Bethel Mission in Hong Kong; the Methodist Archive in Sibu,
Malaysia; the Methodist Theological Seminary in Sibu, Malaysia; the Shanghai
Municipal Archive; and the Shanghai Library. In all, these archives and special
collections provided 4.5 cubic feet of new material by which I could reassess Sung’s
published works.

   Not surprisingly, it soon became evident that the archival material was no less
biased than Sung’s own depiction of events. Union Theological Seminary, for instance,
constructed a story wherein Sung was sent to the asylum not for acting oddly, but because
he had actually become catatonic—a conclusion patently false according to other sources.
Institutions and missionaries had their own reasons for telling and re-telling stories about
John Sung. As they did so, they, too, magnified and diminished certain aspects of his
work.
For assistance in sorting out the mixed historical records, I pursued John Sung’s private diary. In 1995, John Sung’s daughter compiled, edited, and published Lingli jiguang [*Gleanings of My Spiritual Experience*]. It was the first opportunity to read from the diaries that Sung had kept so meticulously during his lifetime. Levi Tianzhen Sung distilled thousands of pages, giving numerous devotional thoughts from her father, and a helpful outline of when he traveled and where he preached. The work shed new light on Sung, but it was clearly incomplete. If I could have access to the unfiltered diary, I speculated, perhaps I could slice through the various accretions and distortions that Sung and others had added to the depictions of his life and ministry.

The only problem with the plan was that Levi Tianzhen Sung was hesitant to let others see the diaries. Negotiations were carried out over several months, until I was finally granted access to his entire collection of diaries—the first person outside of Sung’s family to see his journals. But it came with a stipulation: I had eight hours to copy any pages that I wanted, providing that the total number of copies did not exceed 5% (or 300 pages) of the original manuscripts. That restriction put real boundaries on the scope of this dissertation. I cannot begin to claim comprehensiveness. On the other hand, the strict limitations have intensified my focus. They forced me to select periods in Sung’s ministry that overlapped with the materials I gathered at archives and from special library collections.

The journals are a complex source. The Methodist missionary, W. B. Cole once observed that Sung wrote in his diary constantly. He admitted that some might think Sung
did so with an obsessive quality, but Cole determined that “in reality” Sung stayed so busy journaling because he had lots of notes to make on the Bible. It was a pious sentiment, but not accurate. His first instinct about compulsive behavior was closer to the truth. Notes on the Bible had to be squeezed in alongside a scrupulous catalogue of such things as: what time he arose; bits of conversation he recalled; how many stamps he was given; names of people he met; biblical numerology; which dishes he ate; the diseases for which he prayed; ship schedules; his disgust with people spitting watermelon seeds; the numbers of those converted at a meeting; what he purchased; the sins people confessed; his mother’s thoughts about his harmonica; offerings he received; and counts of how many times his foot itched. The pages are a mishmash of minutia. But this tiny sample of the data only represents the portions that can be deciphered. Plenty of material remains unintelligible. Seemingly random words can make the journal read like it is an experiment in stream-of-consciousness writing. Sung also made enigmatic notes, which may have referred to himself or to another. It is impossible to tell. No doubt, Sung could make sense of it all, but the outside observer is left to puzzle over a difficult and sometimes incomprehensible document.

As such, the journals have not been used to adjudicate differences between Sung’s published works and the letters and reports written by various missionaries and Chinese Christians. Instead, they have been placed alongside them. When viewing John Sung in

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29 W. B. Cole, “A Bible Revival,” *China Christian Advocate* 16, no. 10 (October 1929): 15; Near the end of his life, Sung was even hesitant to go to the hospital, lest it break his 5,000-day record of never missing writing in his journal. See: Song Shangjie, February 12, 1940, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore (henceforth, SSD, TTC).
the context of China and Southeast Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, the three create something like a stereoscope. They are a multi-lens apparatus that adds depth and intensifies contrasts, so that a sharper picture emerges as to why Sung and his revivals generated such intense responses among Chinese Christians.

**Delimitations**

For most of his evangelistic career, Sung travelled eleven months of the year holding scores of meetings. In 1932 alone, he logged more than 17,000 miles as he crisscrossed China to preach in 65 locales.\(^3^0\) This dissertation will not be a travelogue. I will not write about all the cities and towns Sung visited, nor about every country he toured. Instead, I will focus on representative locations that demonstrate important features of his ministry.

Biographical details will likewise be chosen selectively. The focus throughout the dissertation is on Sung’s public ministry, so his childhood as well as his final years of bed rest will be touched only tangentially. The aim is to analyze why people responded so enthusiastically to his revivals. To that end, descriptions of the people and events that configured his ministerial persona, catapulted him onto a new stage, or forced him to adapt his presentation of the gospel will receive the most attention. Matters that were equally weighty but had less influence on the shape of his ministry will almost never appear. For example, John Sung was wedded to Yu Jinhua in 1927, a marriage his parents had arranged for him while he studied in the United States. But his devotion to his revival

\(^3^0\) Jennie Hughes, *Bethel Heart Throbs Surprises* (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1932), 65.
ministry kept them separated for most of his life. Infrequent visits did produce five children, but Sung was never present at the births; neither did mortal sicknesses prevent him from leaving them for his next assignment.\textsuperscript{31} His family was an important fact in his life, but it was almost always a footnote to his first priority: holding revivals.

Outline

The first chapter will focus on the pivotal moment in John Sung’s life, the event to which he determinedly drew everyone’s attention: his conversion at Union Theological Seminary in New York on February 10, 1927. Not only will the chapter explore what happened at Union, but it will also pay close attention to how Sung later narrated and transformed the pivotal events. By deftly exploiting the tensions and aspirations of people from both the United States and China, Sung created an origin story for his revival ministry that was energizing to many, revolting to some, and compelling to all.

In 1931 Sung underwent a second transformation. When he was inducted into the Bethel Mission in Shanghai, an important node in the international holiness network, his style of ministry was almost completely reconfigured. He went from being a wandering peddler of divine mysteries to becoming an electric revivalist, who called for repentance. His metamorphosis will be explored in the second chapter, with special attention given to how the global or pancultural dynamics of revivalism, which Sung learned from Bethel, were expressed in the particular Chinese contexts in which he operated.

\textsuperscript{31} John Sung’s two sons both died as children.
The Bethel Mission initiated Sung into revivalism, but it could not contain him. In 1934 he began to work independently. Sung met strong resistance in one of the first revivals he held on his own, quite possibly because without Bethel’s imprimatur he looked suspicious. The ensuing conflict between Sung and his opponents forced his supporters to emerge from behind his shadow. In the third chapter one can finally glimpse who backed Sung, and why. Class dynamics were intertwined with conversions, and the chapter notes how revivalism has attracted similar audiences in other parts of the world.

Sung began to visit Chinese communities in Southeast Asia in 1935. They were short and sporadic visits at first, though they grew in duration after the Japanese invaded China in 1937. The fourth chapter studies Sung’s first visit to Singapore and, especially, why his revival meetings were dominated by women. Although the focus is an in-depth study of the events in Singapore, it acts as but one example of how Sung’s services helped usher immigrants, and female immigrants in particular, into a spirituality that looked and sounded familiar, yet was tailored to modern, urban realities.

After his death in 1944, John Sung was lionized as a peerless preacher. During his lifetime, however, he was probably best known as a healer. The fifth chapter recovers the importance of divine healing to his ministry, and explores how it took shape. Sung’s confidence that God delivered people from sin and sickness allowed him to compete in China’s crowded medical marketplace. However, when his own health imploded in 1940, he was forced to reconcile his holiness theology about God’s sufficiency with indigenous ideas that insisted it was best to take healing wherever one could get it. The chapter
probes how Sung navigated different ways of approaching healing in order to illustrate the complexities of indigenization.

The chapters are arranged chronologically, but they are not a seamless biographical narrative. His testimony, his preaching, his audience (their class and gender), and his healings are not so much about John Sung, as they are portals into the overlapping worlds in which he lived. The conclusion will reiterate how Sung’s revivals intertwined global movements with local realities, and in that way allowed many people to express their Christian faith in ways that made sense of their changing lives and changing world.
To write about John Sung is to write about his conversion to Christianity, the pivotal event that propelled his life in a new direction. Sung himself requires it. Throughout his career as an evangelist, whether he was preaching or writing, he tirelessly drew his audience’s attention to the experience that stamped him with a new Christian identity. In his autobiography, for instance, Sung devoted 81 of 100 chapters to the events that culminated in his spiritual awakening at Union Theological Seminary in New York, where he studied briefly before returning to China. In his mind, the impressive career he had as an evangelist was merely the dénouement of the real drama.

Sung’s conversion, therefore, is the most prominent feature of his entire life. A quick perusal of biographies, scholarly studies, popular websites and blogs reveals just
how important Sung’s spiritual transformation continues to be.¹ His conversion narrative has incredible staying power, probably because it possesses the elements of a great story: memorable characters, an exotic setting, an intense conflict, an explosive climax, and a satisfying resolution. According to Sung, and his biographers, he woke to genuine or deeper spiritual life on February 10, 1927, while praying in his dorm room at Union Theological Seminary. At midnight, so the story goes, an audible voice declared to Sung, a spiritually tormented student, “Son, thy sins are forgiven.” Invigorated by this word from God, Sung rushed through the seminary halls shouting the Lord’s praises and castigating the professors that he blamed for enervating his faith. In a most memorable and delicious irony, Union, supposedly the expert on spiritual matters, sent the new convert to Bloomingdale Hospital in White Plains, New York—a psychiatric asylum. Nonetheless, the dramatic encounter with Jesus Christ, and the subsequent visions he

received in the hospital, catapulted Sung into a career as China’s preeminent revivalist. At least that is how the story is told.

The task of this first chapter is to confront and sort out the central story that overshadows the rest of Sung’s life. The first part will attempt to recreate the chaos of the event in New York. Material, heretofore unavailable, will be used to demonstrate that what happened at Union was not nearly as tidy a conversion as it later appeared to be. The second part will trace what happened after Sung departed UTS, particularly how both the seminary and Sung found it necessary to streamline the chaos and create a meaningful account of what occurred there. I refer to this second stage, culminating in Sung’s publication of his autobiography Wode jianzheng [My Testimony] in 1933, as the construction of the experience. The third portion will demonstrate how Sung’s story at UTS was later picked up and pressed into its current popular form, but for distinctive political, theological, and ecclesiastical purposes. This final stage I label as the co-option of Sung’s narrative.

All three phases illuminate how Sung’s conversion “happened.” The different stories also illustrate the danger of accepting Sung’s own works as reliable sources. For, despite the image generated by Sung, and repeated by all his subsequent biographers, he did not become the outstanding Chinese revivalist of the twentieth century over night. That identity developed incrementally over time.
The Chaos of the Experience in New York

Born into a pastor’s family in 1901, Sung Siong Ceh grew up in Methodist Episcopal churches in Fujian province, China. Through his connections with American missionaries, he received an invitation to leave his home to study at Ohio Wesleyan University in 1920. Upon arriving in the United States, Sung telescoped his irrepressible energy into his studies. He rapidly advanced, earning a Bachelor’s degree in three years, before moving to Ohio State University where, in three additional years, he added two graduate degrees, including a doctorate in chemistry in March of 1926.

Following a struggle over what to do next, he settled on theological education. Sung wrote to Harry F. Ward at Union Theological Seminary. He reminded the eminent ethics professor that they had met when Sung engineered Ward’s visit to OSU to speak on “The Challenge of China.” Sung told Ward he now wanted to attend UTS, and used their Methodist connection and personal acquaintance to increase his chance for admittance.

Since graduation, Sung explained in his letter of application, much time had been spent thinking through his “life problems,” and now they were finally resolved. “My shell which is composed of fames [sic], money, pagan nationalism, etc. has been completely

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3 Siong Ceh Sung to Harry F. Ward, May 11, 1926, UTS2; Gilbert S. Cox to Harry F. Ward, May 11, 1926, UTS2. Sung convinced Gilbert Cox, for example, to also write to Harry F. Ward. Cox, the pastor of the Indianola Methodist Episcopal Church, issued an “urgent appeal” for Ward to consider helping “one of our students.”
burst and vanished by the love or the energy developed within me.” And, once crucified to the world, Sung had received a divine mandate: “It is the will of our Father that I must utilize my scientific knowledge and experience to discover the fundamental truths underlying both religion and science…. He will work thru me to ‘cast fire’ upon the present organized system of materialism and imperialism.” Sung believed UTS could prepare him for such a vocation.

With characteristic determination, Sung pressured former professors and friends to help him secure a place at UTS. He was particularly concerned about the cost. On the one hand, he wanted to study only one year as a special, non-degree student; on the other hand, in order to be eligible for the remuneration ministerial students could receive from doing supervised field ministry, he was willing to apply for the three-year Bachelor of Divinity program. Eventually, through the mediating influence of his undergraduate Bible teacher, Rollin Walker, UTS generously awarded Sung Siong Ceh an Oriental Scholarship that provided students like him, who had already obtained advanced degrees, full tuition and a $200 stipend for one year of study. Moreover, the seminary granted him

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4 Siong Ceh Sung to Charles R. Gillett, May 25, 1926, UTS2. Gillett was the Secretary to the Faculty, and the Dean of Students.

5 Ibid.


7 Charles R. Gillett to Rollin H. Walker, May 19, 1926, UTS2; Application Form, May 25, 1926, UTS2.
special permission to perform fieldwork at the Church of All Nations in the Bowery, from which he would receive a small gratuity for his services.  

The move to New York City tossed Sung into a sea of social turbulence. New York had just eclipsed London as the largest city in the world, and a mass of humanity, some seven million bodies, choked the urban landscape. Entry into New York was entry into life on a magnified scale. All the issues that were polarizing Americans were played out on a particularly grand stage. Immigration; prohibition; women’s rights; anti-Catholicism; the growing gaps between urban and rural America, the rich and poor, and religious modernists and fundamentalists were all pressing realities in New York City.

Although UTS was located in the middle of this social maelstrom, the seminary did not attempt to hold a centrist position. On the contrary, Union prided itself on its progressive outlook. Shortly after Sung’s arrival, for instance, UTS opened new low-rent apartments for working-class tenants. At Henry Sloane Coffin’s presidential inauguration in November 1926, eight women joined the faculty procession for the first time. As a denominationally independent institution, UTS embodied many ecumenical ideals, and professors frequently appeared in the press calling for Christian unity. Throughout Sung’s short tenure at the seminary, professors and students lobbied for international peace on

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8 Ella Howard, *Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 20, observed that in the 1920s, the Bowery Mission “expanded its efforts to ‘Americanize the immense foreign population’ of the neighborhood through children’s programs.” Sung’s assignment was likely to do something similar. He later fondly recalled working with Chinese children during his field assignment. Song, *Wode jianzheng*, 72-73.
multiple occasions, urging the President of the United States to refrain from displays of imperialist force in various crises brewing in China, Mexico, and Nicaragua.9

Sung was attracted by Union’s expansive social vision. It appeared to be the blossom of his own Christian convictions. For at least two years before his arrival at UTS, he was steeping in the internationalism of the Young Men’s Christian Association. In 1924, when the OSU chapter of the Y and the Methodist Episcopal Church combined to found the International Student Forum (ISF) on the university campus, Sung quickly rose to be president of the organization.

Determined “to bring about a better understanding between nations and races by frank and sincere discussions of world conditions and the exchange of ideas,” Sung organized performances that showcased the cultures of international students, and coordinated conversations about topics that aligned with progressive Christian values, such as the international peace movement, industry and international relations, the place of women in society, and the scourge of racial prejudice.10 Sung was especially sensitive

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10 “Forum Will Discuss World Problems,” *Ohio State Lantern*, August 22, 1924; “America Suffers in Comparison to Oriental Nations,” *Ohio State Lantern*, November 3, 1924. Sung was especially proud of the international concert the ISF put together for OSU and later in his career referred to it often. He was fond of pointing out that “every school president and professor came and participated,” and that the event raised 1,000 yuan, which was thereafter used as an interest-free loan fund for Chinese students. See, for example, Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]* 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 29. However, Sung embellished the facts. He did find 152 patrons for the event, which included OSU’s president, several deans, twenty-one professors, as well as a number of people not on campus. That was a strong turnout, but clearly not every member of the faculty. The musical entertainment provided that night raised $208.08, and was given to the university to loan to any foreign student, not just Chinese students.
to racial issues, having endured the condescension and paternalism of Americans who either saw him as a laundryman, or as the OSU dean once expressed it, a “boy” who would go back to China as a leading citizen.\textsuperscript{11}

In an effort to bring about improved racial relations, Sung organized a World Friendship Banquet at his church for OSU students. He used the occasion to promote equality and thunder against the “race problem here in the United States.” He warned those assembled, “[Racial inequality] is the great stumbling block to democratic civilization and it puts America on the same level with nations that are called heathen here.”\textsuperscript{12} Through his efforts an Inter-racial Council formed at OSU, focused especially on promoting friendship between white and black students. He even convinced the International Student Forum, comprised almost entirely of international students, to pay for their American counterparts to attend the National Interracial Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio, March 25-29, 1925.\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{12} “World Friendship Inter-Racial Group Formed by Forum,” \textit{Ohio State Lantern}, February 9, 1925.

\textsuperscript{13} “Race Groups Organize to Combat Prejudices,” \textit{Ohio State Lantern}, March 12, 1925.
Sung was rewarded for all his work by getting to attend the YMCA’s Lake Geneva Conference later that summer. There he heard YMCA luminaries such as John Mott and T. Z. Koo along with the Christian Socialist J. Stitt Wilson speak about “Christian Personality and the Social Order.” Inspired by their vision, Sung returned to OSU hoping to organize a conference of international students from across the Midwest, and to galvanize them around calls for peace that would be issued by the keynote speakers Sherwood Eddy, Kirby Paige and Alfred Tze. Such efforts for unity and reform were always intertwined with his faith. So much so, Sung was temporarily deposed from the ISF presidency as some international students felt that he had turned the organization into a front for “church propaganda.”

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14 “19 to Represent Ohio State at Y.M. Annual Gathering,” Ohio State Lantern, May 14, 1925; Archives of the YMCA: Student Division, RG 58, Box 79, Folder 1024, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School. In his autobiography, Sung reported that he went to the Lake Geneva Conference in 1923 after he graduated from OWU; later biographers have followed Sung’s dating. However, no external evidence exists for his attendance at the 1923 meeting, whereas a photo has him at the 1925 meeting. It is possible that he attended the conference twice. That would explain Sung’s date of 1923, though it would not bring consistency to his story. For in his account of the event, which he wrote years later, he claimed he withdrew by himself because he found the conference in 1923 too shallow and liberal. If that were the case, why would he return in 1925? Almost certainly, the editorial comment about the shallowness of the summer retreat reflects Sung’s view in 1933 when he wrote his autobiography, and not what he was thinking at the time. Thus, it might be possible that he attended twice, though I am inclined to think he only went once: June 12-22, 1925. See: Song, Wode jianzheng, 50-51.


16 “Student Forum Decides to Hold Convention Here,” Ohio State Lantern, August 19, 1925. Despite Sung’s aspirations, the conference never happened. See: “Two Gospel Teams to be Sent by Center,” Ohio State Lantern, December 16, 1925.

17 “The Postman’s Pack: Letters from Our Readers,” Ohio State Lantern, June 5, 1925. After his return to China, Sung claimed that while he was president of the ISF he was spiritually darkened, and spoke not only of Jesus, but put him alongside Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, and Zhuangzi. However, the frustration among some international students at the time, with a few even complaining that Sung did not respect non-Christian beliefs, indicates that his memories were distorted. In fact, since Sung grew up in a pastor’s home and attended mission schools, he probably shared the common experience of his contemporary Lin Yutang, a nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1940, who complained that because of his Christian family and school he knew virtually nothing of China’s heritage. Lin Yutang, From Pagan to Christian (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1959), 34.
When Sung departed for New York, his pastor, the head of the Columbus Urban League—an organization devoted to ending racism through education, economic, and social progress—approvingly noted that Sung was “especially anxious to do some kind of practical religious or social work that will in a way be a laboratory for his future usefulness.”

Sung went to Union preparing to be a secretary for the YMCA in China, the well-worn path to leadership for Christian intellectuals in China, and hoping that further theological training could help him find answers to pressing social questions.

In New York, Sung frequently accompanied other seminarians to hear famous preachers address the issues of the day. The city offered a full roster of nationally known figures. Baptists Harry Emerson Fosdick and John Roach Stratton both attracted wide audiences. Fosdick, in a sermon written after a visit to China in 1921, had famously rallied progressives when he asked, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” Stratton, “the Pope of Fundamentalism,” was Fosdick’s outspoken critic and opponent. Preaching from the Calvary Baptist Church, he relentlessly strove to recover the “old-time religion,” and invited similar voices to speak from his pulpit.

Most memorably, in the fall of 1926, the famous “girl-evangelist” Uldine Utley was a popular spectacle at Calvary Baptist. She launched a month-long campaign at

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18 Gilbert S. Cox to Harry F. Ward, May 11, 1926, UTS2. See also, “Information for the Department of Field Work,” UTS2, wherein Sung describes his religious activities in Ohio as including “interracial and international work.”

19 “Foreign Student Celebrities Rate Honorary Clubs, Kegs, and Offices,” Ohio State Lantern, February 10, 1926. Later in his life, Sung told audiences that he had multiple options upon graduation. Usually he, and others, suggested he was trying to decide whether he should teach in a state university, do post-doctoral research in Germany, or be the “Chair of Science in Peking University,” Jennie Hughes, Bethel Heart Throbs of Revival (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1931), 23. Yet the material that exists from the time of his graduation suggests he was exclusively thinking about working for the YMCA.
Straton’s Manhattan church, speaking every afternoon and evening, except for Saturday. Utley captured citywide attention soon after Sung arrived for his first semester. The *New York Times* enjoyed the irony; archconservative Straton allowed a woman to preach from his pulpit. The crowds marveled at her angelic looks, youth, and healing powers. UTS students mocked what they considered the absurd and sentimental side of Christianity.20

Although Sung missed Utley’s well-publicized evangelistic meetings that fall, he joined a group of students to see her at the Greene Avenue Baptist Church in Brooklyn in mid-December 1926.21 While his comrades laughed at Utley, Sung was enchanted by the fifteen-year-old. He returned to hear her preach four more times, reporting that in her simple message he heard the wonderful gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Savior’s warning to the world, and the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ.22 For weeks, Sung could not escape her message, feeling as if Utley had awakened something within his soul.

Then, on February 10, 1927 Sung Siong Ceh changed.

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21 “35 Are Pledged by Uldine Utley,” *New York Times*, December 20, 1926. Sung did not identify Utley by name in his autobiography, though his description of a young woman dressed all in white matches Utley’s distinct attire. The Chinese periodical *Evangelism* finally named Utley as the catalyst for Sung’s conversion. See, Chen Renbing, “Miss Uldine Utley—The Girl Evangelist,” *Budao zazhi [Evangelism]* 7, no. 1 (January–February, 1934): 35. The issue of where Sung heard Utley has been debated (see below). I believe Sung heard her at Greene Avenue Baptist Church, because it fits his timeline of when he was spiritually transformed. To have heard her at Calvary Baptist early in the semester does not fit Sung’s description. The smaller revival campaign in December, however, corresponds with Sung’s spiritual quest that started during the Christmas vacation.

22 Song Shangjie, *Wode jianzheng*, reprint (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1995), 76.
The announcement came to UTS in a letter from Sung’s former professor, Rollin Walker, delivered to the seminary on February 17, 1927. Walker had hurriedly scribbled a message to president Henry Sloane Coffin indicating that he had received a disturbing note from Sung that was “beyond all question the product of a strained and for the moment abnormal mind.” He emphasized that Sung had never before displayed any signs of mental instability. “But,” Walker worried, “something has gone wrong.” He enclosed the letter Sung had mailed him:

I see Jesus! He is in me! I see the living cross! I am called to be the servant of the spiritual age! Here is one of the twenty-four visions flooding over my soul, February 10, 1927, at 12 p.m.! You, according to the command of Christ, must help me to distribute this vision throughout the world beginning at Ohio Wesleyan University!

Sung’s letter also contained a diagram in which the continents and principle countries of the world were depicted as the heart, lungs, liver, stomach, and other vital organs of the body. In North America there was an arrow pointing to Niagara Falls—“Where the blood of Christ flows.” Europe was designated as “The stomach of the race where the word of God is digested.” Other pictures were entitled “The Cross” and “The Gross of Man.” Sung strained to explain the meaning of the enigmatic imagery: “This is the living man and the living cross! The mystery of the Cross! Every body is a cell of the perfect man!” Then, abruptly, the letter ended: “By John Love Riter Ring,” introducing for the first time

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time the name “John,” by which Sung Siong Ceh would become known, and which, Sung explained at the bottom of his effervescent letter, was “The name which Christ gives me.”

Uncertain what this meant, Henry Sloane Coffin immediately dispatched Walker Alderton, the assistant director of fieldwork, to investigate. Interviews with students confirmed that Sung was speaking about visions seen on his dorm room wall, and that he believed himself to be a prophet of a new age. Classmates also noted that Sung had uttered premonitions of his death. When Alderton decided to unlock Sung’s dorm room, he uncovered several outlines for books. Two dealt with the Social Settlement movement, while many others were more obscure.

For example:

**PEPPY SUNG**

1. Auditing course (difficulty in studying)
2. Man in Maine (spirit calls)
3. Walked down a street
4. Most interesting courses
5. Holy ground – locked room
6. 5 o’clock – darkness – faces showing themselves
7. Write more
8. Experience with newspaper
   - 12
   - 16
   - 3 – to – 1
9. Go round the world

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25 Ibid. In Chinese, Sung continued to use his given name, though he would occasionally tell an audience that his name, “according to the flesh, is Song Shangjie, but according to the Spirit, Yuehan [John].” Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” *Shengjie zhi\'nan yuekan* 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 26.

Overwhelmed by the incoherence of such writings, Alderton concluded that even the reasonably clear material was “shot through with undoubted sex symbolism.” Sung, he assumed, was psychologically deteriorating.

Based on Alderton’s interpretation of the evidence, Union contacted Dr. Charles Lambert, a psychiatrist. Lambert hurried to Union, where he first examined the collected material and then, after meeting Sung in an arranged interview, determined the student needed to be removed from the seminary. Sung initially resisted the suggestion, but Lambert and professor A. L. Swift, Jr. insisted. Sung finally signed a self-admittance form to the Bloomingdale Hospital in White Plains, New York, at which time president Coffin was duly notified.

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27 Walker M. Alderton to Charles I. Lambert, February 17, 1927, UTS2. According to Ohio Wesleyan Magazine (April 1929): 187, Peppy was Sung’s nickname at Ohio State University “because of his physical vitality.”

28 Ibid.

29 Walker M. Alderton to Charles C. Webber, July 6, 1927, UTS2. Not long before, the State of New York had changed the law so that someone could enter an asylum “voluntarily.” In the 1926, “Annual Report of the Medical Director at Bloomingdale Hospital,” this legal provision is explained: “The statute permitting mentally and nervously sick persons to voluntarily enter a hospital for treatment is a most humane provision and has undoubtedly saved from severe and lasting psychosis many persons who less than 20 years ago could not have received hospital treatment no matter how much they had desired it, until they had satisfied a court that they were sick and in need of such treatment. The policy that has been followed has been to resort to legal restriction only when it was clearly required to protect the patient and to furnish legal authority for detention that could not properly be dispensed with.” Voluntary admission, therefore, meant bypassing the legal system. It did not mean the patient was free to leave on his or her own volition. According to the archivist of Bloomingdale Hospital, “We believe that a voluntary patient had to be discharged from the hospital by the psychiatric staff.” See The Society of the New York Hospital, “Annual Report of the Medical Director of Bloomingdale Hospital, White Plains, New York,” New York, NY: The Society of the New York Hospital, 1926, Medical Center Archives of New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell, as well as Ronald Carroll, email message to author, February 23, 2010. See also, A.L. Swift, Jr. to Henry Sloane Coffin, February 17, 1927, UTS2.
That evening, Coffin authorized payment for the costs of Sung’s hospitalization from the seminary’s Emergency Fund, some sixty dollars per week. Soon thereafter, he sent letters to Sung’s family in China, his pastor in Ohio, and Sung’s former professor Rollin Walker at Ohio Wesleyan University. He explained that Sung was now in an asylum and while the diagnosis was uncertain, he comforted them with assurances that the patient was “receiving every attention and is not in any danger.”

Almost ten weeks later, Coffin faced the grim prospect that Sung’s hospitalization could be permanent. At the end of April, the doctors at Bloomingdale were still reluctant to advance a diagnosis, the exact nature of his malady eluding definition. In the meantime, the Emergency Fund had been tapped for more than $700 and was virtually depleted. With Sung's psychiatric care having consumed enough money to purchase two new Model T cars, the seminary was left with no more money to help. But insofar as Sung had no family able to claim responsibility for him, it fell to UTS to make a decision about treatment. With sensitivity toward the escalating tension over immigrants in the United States, Coffin refused to move Sung to a public hospital, convinced he would be deported immediately. Besides, Coffin wrote, “To make any change at present would, according to his physicians, be deleterious to his well being.” Since Sung needed to

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32 Henry Sloane Coffin to Rollin Walker, April 22, 1927, UTS2.
remain in Bloomingdale, Coffin worked energetically to solve the financial shortfall. On Friday, April 22\textsuperscript{nd}, he wrote to Rollin Walker explaining the situation and expressed hope that many at Ohio Wesleyan University, who knew Sung better than those at UTS, might contribute generously to his care. On the same day, Coffin also sent letters to Halter Jennings and Edward Sheldon, directors at Bloomingdale, explaining that Union’s Emergency Fund had been emptied and asked for a reduction of their fees for Sung’s treatment.\textsuperscript{33}

Sung apparently weighed heavily on Coffin’s mind, for that Sunday, April 24\textsuperscript{th}, Sung’s unresolved case seemingly guided Coffin in the selection of his sermon. Electing to preach from an old, familiar manuscript, Coffin pulled from his file a homily based on Deuteronomy 33:13: “The Deep that Coucheth Beneath.” Speaking at Union College in Schenectady in the morning and Albany First Presbyterian Church in the evening, Coffin specifically addressed psychosis. “It will not do,” he warned the assembly, “to disregard the investigations of painstaking explorers of the depths of our human nature.” Adding, “Any light which can be thrown upon insanity and ‘break-downs’…is welcome.”\textsuperscript{34} He continued:

It makes little difference whether you label the anarchic elements [of the mind] with ‘a legion of demons’ or ‘brute instincts and complexes.’ Labels change with fashions of thought. It is all-important that a man deranged by


disorganizing factors—passions, phobias, fears—should face the unifying and redeeming Son of God.\textsuperscript{35} Back at Union the following day, president Coffin sent a brief note to Sung at the urging of the hospital staff. It echoed the optimistic tone of his sermon and reminded the discouraged patient “that we will always have a place for you when you are well enough to work again.”\textsuperscript{36} Coffin was eager to put the awkward and expensive situation behind him.

Yet Sung was busy complicating the matter. He wrote a series of agonizingly impenetrable letters, and exhibited unsettling signs of suspicion. For instance, during that last week in April, Rollin Walker sent word to Coffin confessing, “I received one or two very sane letters from Mr. Sung, but a week or so ago I received a most distressingly abnormal one which made my heart sink.”\textsuperscript{37} Walker enclosed $100 of his own money for Sung’s care, elegantly expressing his own assessment of the situation. At the end of that week Coffin, too, received a note from Sung. The letter was visually astonishing—the script was excessively ornate, completely different from his previous handwriting—and the message was unclear:

Our dear president Coffin:--

Spiritually in deepest gratitude to your spiritual love and mystical sympathy we pen this epistle of love as our token of gratitude.

Our past misunderstanding has created a spiritual gulf between us. We must learn to forgive each other and follow the wisdom of turtle.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Henry Sloane Coffin to Liong C. Sung, April 25, 1927, UTS2. See also Henry Sloane Coffin to Rollin Walker, April 22, 1927, UTS2.

\textsuperscript{37} Rollin Walker to Henry Sloane Coffin, April 27, 1927, UTS2.
U.T.S. is the best theological seminary in which many prophets are playing the music of love dawning in the spiritual air. Our past spiritual journeys owe mountains of love to spiritual showers of some of your hard fighting prophets.

Trust you will understand desert experiences and say not ‘spiritually drunken.’

Thru your love and cooperation we humbly expect to be spiritual [joined?] and mentally tried in our beloved U.T.S. for a period of two years. 38

The letter continued in a similar vein for some time before mysteriously ending on a conspiratorial note. “Please keep this letter in secret! Silence is the best spiritual cure!” 39

The conclusion was fitting for one who had become afraid that others were out to get him. Sung was telling his visitors that UTS wanted to be rid of him, and he accused the hospital of stealing his money, and refusing to post his mail. 40 He oscillated between effusive praise and belligerent distrust, exhibiting behaviors that were erratic and unsettling.

A day later, the medical team at Bloomingdale discussed Sung’s case. The doctors tentatively offered two potential diagnoses: Sung could be suffering from a vague “paranoid condition,” or maybe he was afflicted with “paranoid dementia praecox”—now

38 Siong Ceh Sung to Henry Sloane Coffin, April 27, 1927, UTS2.

39 Ibid.

40 Mrs. Wilbur H. Fowler to Dr. Mable Lee, June 25, 1927, UTS2; Walker M. Alderton to Rev. Charles C. Webber, July 6, 1927, UTS2.
known as paranoid schizophrenia.\textsuperscript{41} The medical community at the time was uncertain if a patient could recover from schizophrenia.\textsuperscript{42}

Perhaps as a concession to the prospect of interminable care, the head doctor at Bloomingdale sent word to Coffin that the hospital would reduce the cost for Sung’s care and, if need be, allow Sung to stay on for free.\textsuperscript{43} UTS gratefully accepted the offer and transferred the financial responsibility for Sung’s treatment to the hospital. In a gentlemen’s agreement, Coffin gave Bloomingdale the $100 from Rollin Walker and the final $100 in Union’s Emergency Fund; thereafter, Union only paid for occasional minor expenses. By the beginning of July, Sung was no longer a financial liability for UTS. He was a charity case for the asylum.

The hospital administrators must have been relieved, therefore, when the Rev. and Mrs. Fowler arrived in New York and agreed to have Sung discharged to their custody on August 30, 1927.\textsuperscript{44} Wilbur Fowler, the Methodist student pastor at Ohio State University, had been a third referent when Sung applied to UTS the year before, as he had worked closely with Sung in the International Student Forum. Sung was president; Fowler was

\textsuperscript{41} Staff Conference Minutes, April 28, 1927; Staff Records (Cases), Vol 5, Bloomingdale Hospital: 1926–1936, Medical Center Archives of New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell.


\textsuperscript{43} Mortimer W. Raynor to Henry Sloane Coffin, May 3, 1927, UTS2.

\textsuperscript{44} Discharge Book, Vol 2, Bloomingdale Hospital: 1921–1933, Medical Center Archives of New York–Presbyterian/Weill Cornell.
the co-founder, advisor, and frequent host of the group. On his way to Europe in June to join one of Sherwood Eddy’s American Seminars, Fowler and his wife had tried to visit Sung at UTS. When they discovered he had been moved to Bloomingdale, they went to see him. Sung, they reported, spoke lucidly and exhibited no signs of mental degradation. He had confessed to trying to escape on June 23rd, but now lamented that his impetuous action only landed him in semi-confinement with violent patients. Upon their return from Europe, finding Sung still hospitalized, the Fowlers offered to take the young man back to Ohio with them. Since the doctors were operating with an uncertain diagnosis, having recently shifted to labeling Sung as having “psychosis with psychopathic personality,” and because the institution was facing financial pressure to move Sung out of the facility, the hospital administration speedily agreed to their offer. Sung was

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47 Mrs. Wilbur Fowler to Dr. Mable Lee, June 25, 1927, UTS2. The Fowlers were not the only people who went to Bloomingdale to visit Sung. William Alderton, assistant director of field work at Union Theological Seminary, reported that he visited Sung on several occasions. Paul Meng, part of the executive committee of the Chinese Students Christian Association, also reported visiting Sung “frequently.” See: Walker Alderton to Charles Webber, July 6, 1927, UTS2; Frank T. Cartwright to Winfred B. Cole, October 19, 1929, UTS2.

48 Ibid.
released with a note in the discharge book stating: “This patient has been much more cheerful, cooperative and reasonable during the last several weeks.”

Immediately upon his release, Sung sent jubilant word to UTS of his restored health and announced his intention to resume his studies when the semester began in a few weeks. “President Coffin has promised me to return to seminary for pursuing my theological study as soon as I am well. Now I am in perfect good health and decide to take up my study again next fall. Will you kindly reserve a room for me!” When the academic dean notified the president of Sung’s plans, Coffin distanced himself from his earlier letter that had invited Sung to return. “Last winter he became oppressed with the idea that we wanted to be rid of him. So at the suggestion of his physicians I wrote him a cheering letter from which he doubtless has derived the idea that we want him back.” Coffin instructed the dean to deny Sung re-admittance, stating: “We have put out enough money on Sung, and we do not want to risk another breakdown.” The dean dutifully notified John Sung that he could not return to UTS.

Replying on Sung’s behalf, Fowler notified the seminary that Sung would now have to return to China. He complained, however, that Sung was in fact “quite well and normal,” and was “trying to believe in the sincerity and the Christianity of his friends.

49 Discharge Book, Vol 2, Bloomingdale Hospital: 1921-1933, Medical Center Archives of New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell.
50 S.C. Sung to Dean of Union Theological Seminary, [received] September 1, 1927, UTS2.
51 Henry Sloane Coffin to Dr. Gillet, September 4, 1927, UTS2.
52 Ibid.
who sent him to the Hospital.” He appealed to UTS to give “Dr. Sung a great deal of thought and consideration to make up for what he has suffered.” Fowler added that Sung could not locate several valuable items, specifically two silk scarves and two Greek letter keys—the latter being symbols of his academic achievements. He insisted that the Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi keys be recovered and sent to Sung, or “duplicates of the same.” In Fowler’s mind, it was a meager settlement for the egregious treatment Sung had suffered at the seminary’s hands.

In response, Henry Sloane Coffin sent a personal check for $15 to have the keys replaced, but his tone was not conciliatory. He gently chastised Fowler for inferring that Union had acted unfairly toward Sung, explained the thoroughness by which UTS had him diagnosed, and reminded him of the cost for treatment assumed by Union. In his mind, the seminary was the victim, not the victimizer, having absorbed the heavy cost of Sung’s mental care.

The final volley between Fowler and Coffin pointed toward the contested nature of what happened at UTS. The events were unusual, their meanings uncertain. What happened to Sung while he was at UTS was packed with possibilities and generated rival interpretations. Perhaps in part for that very reason, two weeks later Sung departed for China after living in the United States for seven years, an exile from the chaos of what would later be called his “conversion.”


54 Henry Sloane Coffin to Wilbur H. Fowler, September 28, 1927, UTS2.
Multiple Meanings

Since that time, the story of John Sung’s experience at UTS has been so frequently repeated that it appears fixed and certain: Sung was converted at UTS. Yet, before various forces coalesced in subsequent years to impose such an interpretation on the events in New York, what transpired was open to debate. At the time of Sung’s hospitalization there were no foregone conclusions.

If one had to construct the story from these earliest materials, the language of conversion would be absent. In its place a variety of different narratives could vie for legitimacy. At least four other nascent stories were circulating at the time, and each one pointed toward a different outcome.

First, one could interpret what happened at UTS as a psychological breakdown, perhaps the onset of schizophrenia. Although the evidence was hardly conclusive, what existed corresponded well with clinical descriptions of the disease. At twenty-five years old, Sung fit within the standard age range for the onset of schizophrenia. His vivid description of visions and audible voices, the disordered logic of his book outlines and letters, and his sense of persecution were standard symptoms. Something in his brain, one could argue, was not functioning well. Sung himself acknowledged the power of this mental illness narrative when he sheepishly confessed at his discharge that “he was ill when he came to New York.” Gone was the language of religious ecstasy; it was possible to construct the story of Sung’s experience around psychosis.

55 Mortimer W. Raynor to Henry Sloane Coffin, September 1, 1927, UTS2.
A second and entirely different explanation fingered a failed romance as the cause of Sung’s crisis. William Alderton, assistant director of field work at UTS, offered this interpretation at the very beginning. On February 17, 1927, he had investigated Sung’s condition, and reported that he had reason to believe Sung experienced “a great emotional shock, and that a recent love affair has not eventuated happily for him.”\textsuperscript{56} A few months later, he repeated the story of the jilted lover, but told it with less conviction. As best he could put it together, Sung’s “affair of the heart with a Chinese young lady in this country,” was broken off sometime before he moved to New York.\textsuperscript{57} As the event was pushed further into the past, its explanatory power diminished, although it remained one narrative possibility.

Yet a third interpretation might make sense of this period. Sung had a crisis of faith because he was unable to integrate science and religion. The hospital staff gradually came to this conclusion. They believed that “Dr. Sung had been advancing in his grasp of the scientific problems involved in chemical research in rather an astonishing degree, but that he had not made any progress in re-shaping his religious or theological convictions accordingly.”\textsuperscript{58} The final collision between religion and science that occurred while Sung was at UTS had been devastating. The Bloomingdale authorities thought the road to stability for Sung lay in “cutting the Gordian knot of his religious-social-vocational-

\textsuperscript{56} William M. Alderton to Charles I. Lambert, February 17, 1927, UTS2.

\textsuperscript{57} William M. Alderton to Rev. Charles G. Webber, July 6, 1927, UTS2.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
complex by making a clean break and going to work in a hospital in China as a consulting or a research chemist.” It was a plausible outcome, a story in which Sung’s time in New York would have faded away as an unimportant detour on his path to a secular scientific career.

Fourth, one could view Sung’s hospitalization as largely insignificant, and politely overlook the entire episode. This happened, for example, to Harry Emerson Fosdick, who was temporarily institutionalized when he was a student at Union in 1902. Fosdick later returned to the seminary where he polished his liberal theology and rhetoric before going on to his prestigious career as spokesman for progressive Christianity. Similarly, Sung’s plans upon discharge were to return to Union. While he was in the hospital, he had gushed that UTS was “the best theological seminary,” and Coffin warmly invited him to resume his studies upon release. But for Coffin’s change-of-heart, John Sung could have finished his studies at UTS. In this potential narrative, the ecstatic experiences in his dorm room and his hospitalization might have gone unspoken or even been largely forgotten. They would have appeared as exotic but superfluous details, temporary interruptions in the grander narrative of his theological education.

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59 Ibid.


61 Siong Ceh Sung to Henry Sloane Coffin, April 27, 1927, UTS2; Henry Sloane Coffin to Liong C. Sung, April 25, 1927, UTS2.
Despite these narrative possibilities, a later, fifth explanation came to dominate:

Sung was converted. It is to the process of creating that story of conversion, and its generation of a weaker counter-narrative, that I now turn.

The Construction of the Experience in New York

When John Sung returned to China he had an immediate challenge: his family believed he was unwell. Henry Sloane Coffin had sent a letter to Sung’s father, explaining that his son “had a mental disturbance,” and that he had “various delusions, taking the form of visions and the like, and we feel he needs complete mental rest.”62 The account was not detailed, but supplied enough information to raise an alarm. In his memoir, Sung recalled that his parents believed the letter to be true, and that anxiety about his mental state had prematurely aged them. Upon his return, Sung’s parents certainly welcomed him home, but he was dismayed by how carefully they scrutinized his speech and behavior and were unable to disguise their search for any signs of derangement.63

The missionary community was similarly wary, alert to the fact that Union decided to have him hospitalized. Presumably, one of them had helped translate Coffin’s letter to the Sung family.64 However, Sung needed to clear himself of any missionary

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63 Song Shangjie, Wode jianzheng, 94. Although insanity in China was not perceived in the same was as it was in the United States, by the late Qing period it was more than an illness; madness was tantamount to criminal deviance. See: Vivien W. Ng, Madness in Later Imperial China: From Illness to Deviance (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990).

64 The report of Sung’s hospitalization was, in fact, widespread. In his diary he complained that students from the mission schools suspected he had a mental illness. Song Shangjie, November 19, 1927, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore. Thus, even if a missionary did not translate the letter, Sung’s hospitalization was well known within the local Christian community. See, W.B. Cole to the Berwyn M.E. Church, February 10, 1928, UTS2.
doubts about his mental condition, so that he could secure employment at a mission
school and assume financial responsibility for his younger brother’s education.\(^65\) It was
paramount that Sung escape the stigma of his hospitalization and the assumption that he
was insane.

After less than a week’s respite at home, Sung began to preach. He delivered his
first address at his former high school, and chose the five loaves and two fish handed to
Jesus by a young boy as his subject. The sermon was well received, and eventually
developed into a fixture of his evangelistic repertoire. Yet, the importance of the event
was not in the success of that sermon, but in his choice to preach that particular message.
Sung had crafted that sermon two years prior in the United States, and it was one he
apparently preached frequently before his hospitalization.\(^66\) Sung’s opening address in
China was one of continuity with his theological past, confirming, along with his ardent
request to resume study at UTS, that he had—as yet—not understood his experience in
New York as causing any sort of definitive break with his former beliefs.

The charged circumstances in China in 1927, however, marked as they were by
recent political and theological clashes, quickly modified Sung’s perception of his faith
development and provided him the materials for constructing a fresh interpretation of his
experience at UTS. In 1926, Chiang Kai-shek had launched the Northern Expedition in

\(^{65}\) Song Shangjie, *Wode jianzheng*, 94.

\(^{66}\) Song Shangjie, *Wode jianzheng*, 53–56, 65, 94. The sermon may have been written four years
prior if, indeed, Sung went to the Lake Geneva Conference in 1923 as well, for it was there—Sung reported
—that he developed this sermon.
an effort to re-unite a country fragmented by battling warlords. As his soldiers entered Nanjing, some began to loot and damage foreign properties, injuring and even killing a few foreigners. Afraid of a new wave of anti-foreign sentiment, most mission executives followed consular advice, and ordered the evacuation of missionaries from the Chinese interior in the spring of 1927. At that point about five thousand of the roughly eighty-three hundred missionaries serving in China returned to the United States or Europe.67 Almost all the missionaries who remained in China huddled together in treaty port cities, eyeing one another suspiciously, aggravated as they were by the modernist-fundamentalist controversy that had split Western missions in China just the year before. The China Inland Mission (CIM)—the largest mission organization in the country with close to 1,000 missionaries—had withdrawn from the National Christian Council (NCC) in 1926. Although a charter member, the CIM had become increasingly uncomfortable as the NCC printed literature sympathetic to liberal theology and invited social gospel spokesmen, such as Sherwood Eddy, to make evangelistic tours through China. Fearing that people might interpret membership as endorsement of the NCC’s modernist streak, mission executives ordered the CIM to withdraw from the Council. The fallout was extensive. Other mission boards, which were likewise conservative, were suddenly vulnerable. How could they stay in the NCC after the largest conservative mission body had gone? Amid rancor and bitterness one conservative group after another withdrew

during 1927, until the NCC had largely been abandoned to theological liberals, leaving Protestant Christianity in China freshly and deeply divided.\textsuperscript{68}

In that polarized and overheated context a new explanation of Sung’s expulsion from Union emerged. It was a collaborative work, forged in what anthropologist Michael Harkin has called “dialogic space”—that imagined contact zone where the goals and desires of separate parties interact and construct complementary, though not necessarily identical, accounts of reality.\textsuperscript{69} In this case, Sung and the Methodist missionary W. B. Cole developed a mutually useful depiction of Sung’s time at UTS. Cole was a missionary in the Hinghwa Conference where Sung’s father ministered. When most of his missionary co-workers withdrew to the coast or returned home in 1927, Cole remained ensconced at a Methodist school for boys, wielding influence over the Methodist educational system in which Sung hoped to gain employment.\textsuperscript{70} By virtue of Cole’s position, Sung was inevitably drawn into contact with the missionary and—more importantly—with his fundamentalism, which at that time was in the ascendancy in

\textsuperscript{68} For a full exploration of the controversy, see: Kevin Xiyi Yao, \textit{The Fundamentalist Movement Among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920–1937} (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2003), 183–230. Fundamentalism, at the time, was a broadly inclusive term. All manner of Protestants in China, Reformed and Wesleyan alike, gathered together through umbrella organizations like the Bible Union. The theological divisions, which had driven denominations apart, became less important for “moderate fundamentalists” in China, who were primarily concerned with preserving the faith once entrusted to the saints.

\textsuperscript{69} Michael E. Harkin, “Introduction,” in \textit{Reassessing Revitalization Movements: Perspectives from North America and the Pacific Islands} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), xxvi.

\textsuperscript{70} F. Stanley Carson to Dr. Gamewell, September 27, 1927, Missionary Files (Microfilm Edition), United Methodist Church Archives - GCAH, Madison, New Jersey (hereafter, noted as UMC); Song Shangjie, \textit{Wode jianzheng}, 94–95.
Conference politics due to the absence of Cole’s modernist missionary colleagues.\textsuperscript{71}

Between them, a symbiotic narrative evolved that was narrowed by their separate, but nevertheless complementary, aims. The first report of John Sung in China sent to the United States was penned by the hand of W.B. Cole, but the voice was also Sung’s:

[Sung] decided to go to Union Theological Seminary, New York and study theology…. While at Union during private Bible Study and prayer the Spirit flooded his soul with a new light. The Bible became a new book. He spent hours reading it….

His experience turned him back from modernistic paths to a renewed faith in the Bible and its message. He threw aside all of his science as a help to his faith and turned to his new and recent experiences. Soon it was whispered around in the school that he claimed to have had a vision…. Union decided he was insane so they got him to a hospital on the pretext that he was going there sight seeing…. He decided that his prison was meant by the Lord to be “Paul’s Arabia.” So he settled down to Bible Study and prayer going carefully thru the Bible three times.

Rescued by some friends he returned to Hinghwa…. Some of us in our talking with him and in our listening to his preaching have tried in vain to detect anything that borders on insanity. If this remarkable young man is insane then may more of our preachers here get it!\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{71} See, for example, Elizabeth F. Brewster to Dr. Cartwright, April 30, 1929, Missionary Files, UMC; W.B. Cole to Frank T. Cartwright, April 19, 1929, Missionary Files, UMC; W. B. Cole to Frank T. Cartwright, July 24, 1929, Missionary Files, UMC; The Student Club in Foochow, “A Bird’s Eye View on the Religious Condition in Sienu Religious Region,” unpublished report, Missionary Files, UMC. Once the modernist missionaries had evacuated the Hinghwa Conference, they found it very difficult to return. Apparently under the influence of Cole, a member of the fundamentalist Bible Union, Hinghwa churches were reluctant to have them back. George Hollister, for instance, who had to stay at Ohio Wesleyan University, was not welcomed back to China for quite some time. His desire to return to the Hinghwa Conference may have been hindered, in part, because the book he published in Chinese just before his evacuation used the historical-critical method to interpret the Hexateuch. “[T]he first six books of the Old Testament…which disturb faith, which create doubt, [and] which cause most difficulty in preventing non-Christians from understanding the purpose of the Church.” Although Hollister intended to help answer some of the difficult questions posed by anti-Christian propaganda, his confession in the Preface that, “Truth has more than one facet,” and that “the viewpoint of the ancient writers differed from ours, [and] certain phases of truth which appeared important to them, may seem to differ radically from views we hold and consider important…” would have made him a suspect character in the midst of the fundamentalist-modernist debate. George Hollister, “Translation of Preface,” Missionary Files, UMC.

\textsuperscript{72} W. B. Cole to the Berwyn M.E. Church, February 10, 1928, UTS2.
When the events were thus recorded, Sung’s time in New York served both Cole and himself. W. B. Cole was able to lampoon modernism, while Sung used fundamentalism’s potent language to recapture the essentially transcendent dimension of his experience and resurrect the spiritual significance he had originally ascribed to the events at UTS—although now noticeably without the vivid, and at times confusing, religious imagery of his visions. In addition, when this new story explained Sung’s expulsion from Union as part of the same conflict that was currently dividing Protestants in China, his testimony exploited prejudices that lingered after the break-up of the National Christian Council. The story was powerful because in the contentious context of China, UTS—the flagship seminary of modernism—could be drawn into binary opposition to Sung (UTS/modernism/bad – Sung/fundamentalism/good). Such a mythic narrative framework easily emerged from a divided Christian community and allowed Sung to reverse the polarities of suspicion about his mental state. Among fundamentalists at least, if any party in this new story was deluded, it was Union.

Not everyone at UTS immediately recognized the power of this narrative. When Cole’s letter reached his supporters in Berwyn, Illinois, a concerned friend of the seminary forwarded a copy to Professor Harry F. Ward. Ward’s initial response was dismissive. “I do not know personally the last chapter in Sung’s experience here, but I do

73 As the calendar year turned from 1927 to 1928, Sung wrote a brief summary of the year in his diary. Ecstatic experiences and divine commissions were not mentioned. Sung did, however, order the events of the year around the day on which he now said he was “born again.” See: Song Shangjie, December 30, 1927, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore (henceforth, SSD, TTC); Song Shangjie, January 1, 1928, SSD, TTC; and Song Shangjie, January 2, 1928, SSD, TTC.
know that ‘Union never decided he was insane.’ Expert medical opinion advised that he go to Bloomingdale for treatment.”74 The seminary, he believed, needed no defense.

Other Union authorities, however, clearly grasped the threat of a rogue account and intervened to create an alternative version of what transpired in February of 1927. Professor A.L. Swift, Jr., who had originally pressed Sung to go to Bloomingdale, sent Ward an explanatory memo. He responded to Cole’s charge that Union duped Sung into leaving. “Dr. Sung,” he insisted, “went of his own volition, upon the assurance of Dr. Charles I. Lambert, a noted psychiatrist, that he was mentally unwell.” He then proceeded to add his own memories of the case. Swift believed Sung was afflicted by hallucinations, for Sung had declared in his presence that he was the prophet of a new Dispensation, and insisted “that he was ‘clothed all in white with a great girdle about my waist’ – ‘a cross always in my right hand and a Bible in my left. No one else can see them, but I can!’”75 Union’s Walker Alderton likewise contacted Ward and described Sung’s unusual behavior on the day of his hospitalization. Despite the biting cold, Sung had stood in the seminary Quadrangle for the entire afternoon. Sometimes he stared “straight ahead into space, and later in the afternoon [watched] the children play…. He was there until almost supper time when he joined some passing students and went off with them for supper.”76


Union, there was a clear drive to psychologize the disordered events. With the new contributions of his colleagues in hand, Harry F. Ward drafted a revised account of what occurred on February 17, 1927 and then sent his version to all the churches on W. B. Cole’s mailing list. Union was not going to countenance a one-sided story.

By 1931, the dean of the seminary himself produced a rebuttal of the claims that Union mistreated Sung. In so doing, he standardized the mental breakdown narrative. Dean Gaylord White crafted a carefully worded two-page defense of the seminary in response to increasing reports, passed along by alumni ministering in China, that UTS acted unjustly toward Sung. Sung, he argued, was sick before he ever arrived at Union. “In his correspondence with regard to entering the Seminary there are evidences of a mind under tension. There was a mystical quality about his state of mind bordering almost on the fantastic which might have forewarned us that Dr. Sung was not by any means an ordinary type.” In White’s account of the events, the description of the routine interview arranged between the psychiatrist and Sung was suppressed. In its place stood a more disturbing description of Sung in a catatonic state. “Dr. Sung…seemed a little queer. This became accentuated and finally when he remained in the quadrangle one cold day for, as I recall it, several hours without moving and without speaking even when he

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77 Modernism was not only theological but psychological as well. In the 1920s, psychology was the new temple of modernity, and Union’s authorities conscientiously embraced and employed its terms in caring for Sung’s soul.


79 Gaylord S. White to Paul G. Hays, May 12, 1931, UTS2.
was addressed, it was evident that he was in an abnormal condition.” Therefore, in Union’s final telling the psychiatrist had no choice but to arrange for Sung to be admitted to Bloomingdale. Union apparently found satisfaction in White’s narrative and henceforth had all professors insert his two-page justification into the letters that they wrote in response to queries about John Sung. Union had created a codified account.

Missionary versions, on the other hand, multiplied, and differed significantly as missionaries interacted with the peripatetic Sung. The details were in flux. For a brief period the accent of his testimony shifted, as the modernist-fundamentalist controversy cooled, particularly after the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Union Theological Seminary’s importance faded, and one observer was content to emphasize how Sung had “thrown in his lot with the forces which are working for peace and order in Chinese affairs.” The respite from hostility was short-lived, however, as press releases in 1932 about the Laymen’s Inquiry into foreign missions acted as a call to arms among the fundamentalist rank and file. Suddenly Sung’s conversion at Union was revived, and it

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80 Ibid.
81 Ohio Wesleyan Magazine (April 1929): 187. Note, too, how the fundamentalist William Schubert entirely dropped Union from his biographical sketch on Sung in 1931. His focus was on the inadequacy of science and the efficacy of prayer. William Schubert, “Revival in Kiangsi,” Bible for China (May 1931): 49. In general, Sung’s sermons in 1931 did not focus on the negative experience he had at UTS, but on the positive revelations he received from God while in the asylum. For more on the ups-and-downs of the fundamentalist-modernist conflict in China, see: Kevin Xiyi Yao, The Fundamentalist Movement among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920-1937 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc 2003).
82 Kevin Xiyi Yao, The Fundamentalist Movement among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920-1937 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003). For examples of how Fundamentalists responded to the Laymen’s Inquiry, see: Bible for China (January 1933) and Bible for China (May 1933). Sung was surrounded by those who despised the report, including his employer at the time, Dr. Mary Stone [Shi Meiyu].
became the defining characteristic of his ministerial identity. In the rush to exploit his tale, missionary versions of what exactly happened to Sung varied: he had studied in Ivy League schools (not Ohio); Sung had entered Union to study philosophy (not theology); Sung first heard the pure gospel at the well-known fundamentalist Dr. I.M. Haldeman’s First Baptist Church (not the more obscure Greene Avenue Baptist), etc. While particulars fluctuated, the core story coalesced.

The attacks on Union and modernism, in particular, intensified. Shortly after Sung’s arrival in New York, for instance, one missionary charged that “Union took his Bible from him,” and another used his story to accuse UTS professors of being hypocrites. Whereas Sung was depicted as jubilantly breaking with “nominal Christianity,” his classmates and professors were vilified because they “objected to their [spiritual] slumber being disturbed.…. “What a terrible indictment of the Professors at Union,” one missionary letter opined, “that they did not recognize the workings of the Spirit of God. Blind leaders of the blind taken up with their own wisdom, setting their own theories in the place of the Word of God. They did not know when the Spirit of God

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83 See, for example, Ruth M. Bayliss to Daniel J. Fleming, January 21, 1932, UTS2; Anne E. Foster, “Dr. John Sung at Kaying, Kwantung Province, China,” unpublished paper, [1932], UTS2.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ruth M. Bayliss to Daniel J. Fleming, January 21, 1932, UTS2.
was working in their midst, but said, ‘He is crazy.’” Union, standing in for theological modernism, was pitifully lost.

This polemicized version of Sung’s experience at Union flourished in the fundamentalist-modernist soil in which Sung and Cole had first planted it. Their interpretation of the events was attractive because it justified the withdrawal of conservative mission organizations from the liberal—and therefore spiritually blind—National Christian Council. In addition, the polarized story was seductive because it mirrored fundamentalists’ perception of their own recent history. Sung, just like fundamentalists in American denominations and mission boards, was briefly an embattled minority in an institution hostile to his spirituality until, ultimately, the so-called “experts” forced him out. Sung’s experience at UTS could be depicted, and therefore explained, as a microcosm of fundamentalism’s own process of marginalization in the 1920s and early 1930s.

Yet missionaries did not continually repeat his story simply because of the twinning of their experiences, but as a way to revitalize fundamentalism’s identity. Told from their position as recently alienated outsiders anxious to avoid falling further and eager to regain cultural significance, missionaries accentuated at least two features of

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88 Ibid.


Sung’s life. First, his education was a prominent part of every fundamentalist missionary account. Sung’s academic pedigree was precious at a time when the movement’s popular appeal and populist proclivities in America had been eclipsed by the rising esteem for science and university-trained experts. Therefore, fundamentalist missionary versions of the pertinent events in Sung’s life invariably highlighted his Ph.D. in chemistry, and often remarked on the incredible speed at which he attained it. In their attempt to depict him (and by association, themselves) as intellectual, scientific, and modern, his achievements were occasionally embellished. His promotion to an Ivy League school, for instance, was presumably done in order to impress a more respectable identity upon an insecure fundamentalism. Second, conservative missionaries also focused on Sung’s revival ministry as the glorious outcome of his struggle with UTS. Although driven from the institution, so their stories went, Sung was never defeated. In fact, his expulsion was more properly a liberation that inaugurated his dramatic rise in influence and power. Before American fundamentalism retreated into prophetic pessimism, in which fundamentalists narrated their alienation as a sign of the ruin of the church and the precursor to Christ’s return, this version of Sung’s experience at UTS offered the beleaguered movement hope and promised renewal. The popularized story of Sung having an unwelcome spiritual awakening while attending UTS was created, in part, by the anxieties and aspirations of American fundamentalists.

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91 Ibid., 36.
92 Ibid., 38.
On the other hand, Sung’s story was also created in and for China. Since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, “scientism”—the belief that all aspects of the universe were knowable by science, and therefore everything could be reduced to science—had captured the intellectual elite of the Chinese nation. Although the proponents of scientism were seldom scientists or even philosophers of science, by the late 1920s their intention of using the values and assumptions of science to eradicate traditional values was exercising considerable political influence. In 1928 and 1929, as Sung began actively preaching, the Nationalist government launched a vigorous “Smashing Superstition Movement” in an effort to eradicate all religious practices that appeared non-scientific, or more specifically, to purify religion of those aspects that the state identified as retarding modernity. Although directed primarily at Chinese folk religion, the rhetoric against superstition and the state’s insistence that scientific rationality also encompassed religious beliefs furthered the desire of Sung and missionaries to capitalize on his image as a Western-trained, modern scientist. At the beginning of his ministry, when Sung declared that all “religious truth is to be tested by spiritual life and science,” he claimed to have the prized credentials to make such a statement. Despite his scientific training having little


or nothing to do with his unusual experiences in New York, his academic achievement was too valuable to cast aside. In China, Sung’s extremely rare education elevated even his spiritual teachings so that they seemed unassailable to those eagerly pursuing modernity. He could easily appease the Chinese elites enamored by scientism and appear to conform to the state’s canons for a modern religiosity while subverting both. Sung’s peculiar experiences in New York popularly acted as a point of resistance to the despised Smashing Superstition Movement. Even as the Chinese government condemned such things as prognostications and otherworldly visions, Sung’s narrative of what transpired at Union increasingly emphasized those very elements. His scientific background never produced a strict naturalism; instead, it provided the necessary “scientific” authorization to baptize large swaths of popular Chinese religiosity. The Chinese context in which Sung’s story took shape encouraged a double-voiced narrative, a story that was simultaneously preoccupied with scientific credentials and ecstatic experiences.

In 1933 Sung published *Wode jianzheng* [My Testimony], a spiritual autobiography. In it, Sung’s voice was no longer channeled through missionaries but was ostensibly his own. The book offered the same spiritualized interpretation of his experience in New York as the one he developed interacting with fundamentalist

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missionaries. Yet in this expanded account Sung further elaborated and manipulated the events for his own purposes.

Reflecting the impact of fundamentalist anxiety and aspirations, as well as the power of scientism, his book was consonant with the earlier accounts that emphasized his academic achievements. The book’s cover itself carefully drew attention to the fact that Sung had a doctorate. In his memoir, he used many chapters to describe how he completed his bachelor’s degree in three years, despite beginning Ohio Wesleyan University with only a rudimentary knowledge of English. He not only finished a year early, but Sung claimed (incorrectly) that he graduated at the highest rank.98 Newspapers from around the country and Europe, he told his readers, picked up on the story and made him a celebrity, though in reality, coverage only appeared in the OWU student paper.99 He also provided the improbable details of how he translated a thick German Chemistry book into English in one afternoon for his Ph.D. entrance exam at Ohio State University.100 He even went so far as to declare he obtained his doctoral degree in science

98 Song Shangjie, 50. Sung did indeed graduate cum laude, but this would not be the “highest rank.” Eight students graduated magna cum laude. Nonetheless, his achievements were impressive. Phi Beta Kappa recognized Sung for his academic excellence and 2.70 grade point average by electing him and only sixteen others from his class to the society. Still, this did not put him among the “top four students,” as he claimed elsewhere. See, The Ohio Wesleyan Transcript, June 12, 1923; The Ohio Wesleyan Transcript, March 28, 1923; Song Shangjie, “Boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 28.

99 “17 Seniors Make Phi Beta Kappa in Spring Elections,” The Ohio Wesleyan Transcript, March 28, 1923. Absence of evidence is never conclusive evidence. However, major newspapers from Europe and the United States were consulted to see if Sung appeared around the time of his graduation. Nothing was found. Ohio newspapers were likewise silent. Even the local newspaper carried nothing about Sung. The only article found that talks about his academic record is the one named above.

100 Song Shangjie, 61–62.
in just six months!\textsuperscript{101} (Sung did complete his degree rapidly, but it took two academic years.\textsuperscript{102}) With similar bravado and inaccuracy, he also explained to his readers that when he enrolled at Union he arranged with the seminary to take all “the valuable courses” at the school within one year and thereby complete the three-year program in just two semesters.\textsuperscript{103} Not long into his study, though, Sung reported he had taken in all that Union could possibly teach him, so he withdrew to the library where he could learn more on his own.\textsuperscript{104} He claimed his independent activities included studying other religions, writing several books (the most important being a translation of Laozi’s \textit{Dao De Jing} into English), and chanting Buddhist sutras. These final additions functioned not only to reiterate his status as a cosmopolitan intellectual, but also signaled the depths to which he had fallen. In Sung’s telling, such details were simultaneously indicators of his own—and Union’s—impressive intellectual standing \textit{and} darkened spiritual condition.\textsuperscript{105}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[101] Song Siong Chiat, \textit{My Testimony: Being the Autobiography of Dr. John Sung (Song Siong Chiat) the Chinese Evangelist}, translated by E. Tipson (Kuala Lumpur: Caxton Press, 1936), 68. Current Chinese manuscripts (printed in 1995) state Sung graduated after a year and an half, but the earliest extant manuscript (although in English) translated the section in question by stating Sung graduated in half a year. I find the exaggeration consonant with Sung’s writing, and believe it is more likely something that would be corrected later rather than mistranslated earlier. Therefore, I prefer Tipson’s English translation on this point.

\item[102] \textit{Ohio State University, March Convocation}, March 19, 1926, Ohio State University Archives, Columbus, Ohio.

\item[103] Song Shangjie, 71.

\item[104] Ibid., 74.

\item[105] Ibid., 74–75, 79. When his ministry later extended into Southeast Asia, Sung augmented what he told his audiences. In Indonesia, for instance, Sung no longer talked exclusively about studying Buddhism and translating the \textit{Daodejing}, but claimed that he explored Islam as well. Cornelie Baarbé, \textit{Dr. Sung, een Reveil op Java: Over de Evangelist Dr. Sung en zijn preken} (Deen Haag, Netherlands: Voorhoeve, 1960), 4.
\end{footnotes}
Corroborating earlier unflattering depictions of Union, *My Testimony* cast UTS as the pathetic foil to Sung’s powerful conversion. Gone was his effusive praise of the seminary. Sung now construed it as a place that poisoned theology students, degenerated faith, and withered spiritual life. In his writing, UTS was precisely the sort of place where Sung would be encouraged to investigate other religions and be affirmed in his conclusion that the “the highest religion really was not Christianity.” Secular science, Sung decried, reigned supreme at Union. He wrote how students at UTS were never able to understand why he would still bother to come to a seminary after obtaining a degree in science. That attitude was indicative, he surmised, of the “unspiritual and empty” condition of the institution. Hollowed out by such modern ideas, Sung concluded Union needed Uldine Utley, the girl evangelist, to be a professor. She could teach the venerable president a thing or two! For, he damningly informed his readers, the people at Union had “absolutely no experience of being born again.”

Sung had an almost Manichaean view of Union’s spiritually dead condition, in order that the darkness might proclaim more clearly the glory of the light. Amidst the deadly liberal intellectualism of UTS, Sung depicted the dramatic events of February 10, 1927 as the birth of true spiritual life. Whereas missionary documents had been reticent to

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106 Ibid., 73.
107 Ibid., 75.
108 Ibid., 72.
109 Ibid., 77.
110 Ibid., 84.
define his experience in New York as a conversion, preferring to label it as a renewal of faith or a break with nominal Christianity, My Testimony insisted it was the moment Sung was “born again.”

Compared with what God accomplished in his heart on February 10, 1927, all previous religious experiences were dismissed as irrelevant. Sung had been saved! On that evening, he wrote, as he was praying and seeking God for mercy, his sins were shown to him one by one. Their collective weight was crushing. In a panic that he would not escape the torments of hell, Sung frantically dug in his trunk and pulled out his neglected Bible. When it fell open to Luke 23, he was pulled into the narrative of Jesus’s crucifixion. Sung felt as if he were truly following the Messiah to Golgotha. In the vision, he suddenly saw “Jesus already hung up high on the cross. His head hung to one side, his two hands dripped blood.” The power of the image tormented Sung’s soul, convulsing him with tears until midnight when he suddenly heard a voice declare, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” It was, in Sung’s words, “my spiritual birthday.”

Although he claimed it was the night in his life that he remembered best, his recollections were characteristically incomplete, faulty, or even invented. Sung reconfigured the events in order to maximize their significance; his alterations were

111 Ibid., 79–82.

112 Despite his theological heritage, which included the language of “backsliding,” Sung rejected the notion that he had earlier been saved. Although he had long been active in church, even preaching, he believed that until February 10, 1927 he had been “a person without the experience of being born again,” and therefore unable to cause his listeners to receive spiritual life, because he himself had not yet the life of Christ. Sung explained his unregenerate condition prior to the events in New York as stemming from the fact that “it was not God’s set time, nor did I have enough faith.” See, Song Shangjie, Wode jianzheng, 19, 28, 65–66.

113 Ibid., 81.

114 Ibid.
attempts to clarify the importance of his experience. Sung, for instance, recorded in My Testimony that on the night of his spiritual birth God gave him the name “John.” He provided a precise description of its meaning for his reading audience. He was in the line of John the Baptist. Just as the Baptizer was the forerunner of the Lord, so at this late hour Sung was chosen to be a forerunner of the returning Christ. “John” had a biblical and eschatological meaning, befitting Sung’s polished interpretation of what transpired that evening. He failed to mention any of the other names that were also bestowed upon him that night, “Love,” “Riter,” or “Ring.” Sung could justifiably leave them out of his memoir because they were superfluous, awkward, or forgotten details. Such a decision was emblematic of how Sung constructed his entire narrative. He simplified events in order to focus on spiritual transformation.

Sung also reordered reality for rhetorical effect. He inserted memorable—if inaccurate—additions to My Testimony. He wrote, for instance, that one week after his conversion, he went out to purchase a new Bible. On his way back to the seminary he received a series of divine, if initially cryptic, messages. He encountered three different children in three different places writing the word “rest” on the road. Sung believed he could not dismiss what he saw as coincidence and was pondering the possible meaning of the message when the seminary president met him at the doors of UTS. Henry Sloane

115 Ibid., 81–82.

116 In an earlier essay published on this subject, I stated that Sung transposed the date of a vision he had of a globe changing into the shape of Jesus to a week after the fact. I am no longer so certain. I have chosen, therefore, to leave that argument out of the dissertation. See: Daryl R. Ireland, “John Sung’s Malleable Conversion,” Fides et Historia 45, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013): 68-69.
Coffin barred Sung from entering and told him he needed a rest. Coffin convinced Sung to go to the countryside for a break, never informing him that he would be staying in a psychiatric ward. Yet, according to the records from that day, Sung was not intercepted outside UTS by Coffin and hurriedly shuffled off to Bloomingdale without his knowledge of the destination. On the contrary, the psychiatrist Charles Lambert interviewed him inside the seminary, after which Sung signed his own self-admittance slip to the asylum, at least partially convinced he needed the break. President Coffin never met directly with Sung, but was apprised of the situation through a series of memos. Sung’s license in retelling his story clearly came at the expense of Union, but more importantly, it granted Sung the opportunity to narrate the events of his hospitalization in terms of a grander biblical motif. UTS “intended to harm me,” so his story went, “but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20).

In that vein, Sung recounted the unexpected benefits of hospitalization. Despite Union’s sinister motives, for example, Sung rejoiced in how the Lord provided him free room and board at the hospital during a time when the cost of living in the United States spiked because of flooding. Similarly, he believed God used the mental patients to teach him lessons about all kinds of people. He also learned to trust the God who

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117 Ibid., 91. Sung was referring to the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, which was the most destructive flood in the history of the United States. (See: Stephen Ambrose, “Great Flood,” National Geographic, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/05/0501_river4.html, accessed May 22, 2014). Of course, the stay was not free. It cost UTS over $700, and it was the layout of so much money that prompted Henry Sloane Coffin to forego his invitation for Sung to return to UTS, lest another breakdown cost the seminary even more money.

118 Ibid., 89.
delivered him from the asylum after 193 days, just as God had said.\textsuperscript{119} Most importantly, though, exile from Union was but the beginning of his divine education. In the hospital, he wrote, “I derived 40 methods of study, and I read the Bible 40 times. Of course, I did not read the Bible crudely word by word...[but] God showed me certain key words like ‘love’, ‘faith’, ‘righteousness’ which led me to link them up through the whole Bible.”\textsuperscript{120} Beyond that, “there were also visions, pictures, miserable circumstances, all of which became material for instruction.”\textsuperscript{121} Because UTS was contaminated by modernism, he concluded, the mental hospital had become his true seminary.\textsuperscript{122} Necessarily, Sung never disclosed his attempt to return to UTS upon his release from Bloomingdale. His silences

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 91-92. In his earliest account of how he was discharged from Bloomingdale, Sung explained that God told him that morning that he would be released later that day. In 1933, however, Sung wrote that God warned him in the middle of his stay that he must endure 193 days and then he would be released. A more significant growth in Sung’s story about his discharge comes in regard to the instrumentality of the Chinese government. Early records make no reference to Sung communicating with the Chinese government about his situation at Bloomingdale, but in 1933 he wrote that the Chinese government pressured the hospital for his release in response to a letter Sung sent to the ambassador, chronicling his “unreasonable detention.” No evidence exists for such an intervention, though others biographers have reported the same detail. William Schubert, in fact, wrote in \textit{I Remember John Sung} (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 1976) that he spoke personally with the Chinese consul about Sung’s release sometime after the fact, and the consul confirmed that Sung was sane, and so sent Sung back to China. While I am reluctant to challenge an author’s personal memory, Schubert’s information was recorded many years after the event and his book consistently echoed or even amplified Sung’s own fabrications. In this situation, for example, he said the consul sent Sung back to China, though evidence shows that was clearly not the case. Thus, while it is impossible to insist the government was never involved based on the silence of the evidence, I do believe the burden of proof shifts to those who want to argue that the government was involved. For an early testimony to compare with \textit{Wode jianzheng [My Testimony]}, see: Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan} 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 26-31.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 93 In this case, I have quoted Timothy Tow’s translation from \textit{John Sung My Teacher} (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1985), 81. Sung hinted how he employed this method in his sermon “Gelingduo qianshu dishishanzhang [First Corinthians 13],” \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan} 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 6, when he explained: “When I was locked in the mental asylum, God’s Spirit personally led me, asking me to read sections of the Bible, replacing every word ‘love’ with the word ‘Jesus’!”

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 92–93.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
had become at least as essential and important as any of his additions, revisions, or exaggerations.

By reordering his experience at UTS around the concept of rebirth, salvation became the lodestar, the central concept that could organize the chaos. The unusual events that overtook him in February 1927 were like streaks of lightning that momentarily illuminated an alternative reality even as the light quickly faded away. Later, by laying hold of the concept of being born again in that instant, Sung reinvented what he “saw” in that sudden moment of spiritual enlightenment. His descriptions of what happened and what it meant do not correspond with the initial records. His story bears the marks of having evolved through his interactions with people and the historical forces that intersected his life, proving that his interpretation of the events in New York did not come ready-made. His famous conversion story had a history. It may have been narratively compressed to a moment—midnight, February 10, 1927—but it took six years for Sung to create that explanation of the events.

**The Co-option of the Experience in New York**

More than two decades after his publication of *My Testimony* and ten years after his death in 1944, Sung’s experience at UTS was given new life. Leslie Lyall’s English biography of John Sung appeared in 1954, and it again recast Sung’s story for a new audience, imprinting a particular and lasting image of the evangelist’s experience at UTS on the popular imagination.
Fundamentalism in the United States changed in the late 1920s. Ecclesiastical defeat had marginalized many fundamentalists, and some finally withdrew from their denominations, leaving the movement fluid and somewhat fragmented. That did not mean, however, that fundamentalism dissipated. In fact, between 1929–1942 fundamentalists regrouped as they created an extensive infrastructure that tied the movement together.\(^{123}\)

Through these institutions, many religious conservatives nipped at their modernist opponents. Having for years suggested that theological liberals \textit{acted} like a “Communistic, Fascist or Nazi regime,” when they took control of American denominations, it was a small step for some fundamentalist leaders to accuse liberals of actually \textit{being} political enemies of the state during the Cold War.\(^{124}\) They had material, and much of it revolved around UTS. Union students, for example, were remembered for running the Russian flag up the seminary flagpole. In 1954, theological conservatives widely publicized the news that UTS professor Harry F. Ward was named before the Committee on Un-American Activities in the U.S. House of Representatives as “the chief architect for Communist infiltration and subversion in the religious field,” and that under


his leadership “the Communists had…forces in the seminaries.”

In the tense political climate of the time, theological conservatives effectively fused together religious progressives, Communism, and Union Theological Seminary.

The biography *John Sung*, published by the China Inland Mission (CIM) in 1954, appeared in that context. For most English readers, the book introduced John Sung for the first time and powerfully shaped his popular image. Leslie Lyall, a CIM missionary who had been forced to leave China in 1950 by the new communist regime, wrote the book. He relied almost entirely on Sung’s *Wode jianzheng* [*My Testimony*] to draw the attention of his English reading audience to the fascinating events that transpired at Union in February 1927. Circulating Sung’s story in conservative circles, Lyall’s rendition of the events in New York quickly took on new and eerie resonances. For his readers, who were accustomed to equating Union with communism, the parallels would have been clear enough. Union rejected John Sung and had him physically removed from the seminary; communist China, likewise, rejected Western missionaries and had them physically removed from the country. Sung’s expulsion had prefigured recent events.

For liberal theologians, the debacle of all foreign missionaries being forcibly removed from China was a cause for soul-searching. What had Christian missions done

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126 Although E. Tipson had translated *Wode jianzheng* into English in 1936, it was published in Kuala Lumpur and had a small circulation. Comparatively, Lyall’s biography first published by the CIM has been printed at least twenty times and translated into eight languages.
to produce such animosity? For some, like John C. Bennett of UTS, the answer was “the failure of Christians to concern themselves about economic justice and about racial discrimination.” Others, however, made more sweeping condemnations. After being evacuated from China, missionary David Paton wrote *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God* in 1953. The title succinctly captured the point of his book: Western missions had been judged and found wanting. It was now impossible, Paton argued, to pursue missions in the same way as before.

Conservative groups, on the other hand, remained optimistic about the modern missionary enterprise. For those who had eyes to see, Lyall’s story of Sung’s remarkable ministry after his expulsion from UTS confirmed their hopeful vision for the future of Western missions. The darkness of Union had tried to extinguish the light of Sung’s spirituality, but the good news, for those who read the story of Sung and Western missions in tandem, was that the darkness had not overcome the light. Western missions, like Sung, could faithfully carry on, even if they had been expelled from China. In fact, if Western missions were indeed following the same path as Sung, the best mission days lay ahead! Not surprisingly, Leslie Lyall became a recruiter for the China Inland Mission.

Besides the political-spiritual parallels, Lyall’s account of Sung at Union introduced several other features. Most strikingly was his reinterpretation of Sung’s

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conversion. In his autobiography in 1933, Sung had explicitly stated that he was born-again on February 10, 1927 at UTS.\(^\text{130}\) Lyall, on the other hand, argued Sung was already born-again, so he had—in fact—been filled with the Holy Spirit on that date.\(^\text{131}\) This alteration was a way for Lyall to gain not only a theological point that meshed well with the CIM’s Keswick theology, but it also united some potentially inconsistent features in Sung’s own story.\(^\text{132}\) Sung’s account was complicated. He reported that he had been converted as a child. He had preached with his father from a young age, and he had been heavily involved in student and church ministries while studying at Ohio Wesleyan University and Ohio State University.\(^\text{133}\) Lyall was reluctant to attribute all of that spiritual work to an unregenerate heart. More troubling still, sometimes in his sermons Sung altered when exactly he had been saved, even once reporting that it was after he left Union and returned to China.\(^\text{134}\) Lyall explained these bothersome idiosyncrasies by

\(^{130}\) Song Shangjie, 79.

\(^{131}\) Lyall, Biography of John Sung, 42–43.

\(^{132}\) The Keswick movement proclaimed God performs a second work of grace, distinct from regeneration, in which the Holy Spirit fills a person’s life and thereby empowers him or her to live a holy life. By labeling Sung’s experience in New York as a second work of grace, not his moment of conversion, he was promoting Keswick’s holiness theology. Keswick spirituality had pervaded the China Inland Mission since the days of its founder, J. Hudson Taylor. Taylor was closely affiliated with the Keswick Conventions and he “sought to institutionalize Keswick piety in the CIM.” Alvyn Austin, China’s Millions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832-1905 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 187.

\(^{133}\) While at Ohio Wesleyan University, Sung was part of the University’s Gospel Team and when he attended Ohio State University he likewise traveled with evangelistic groups—particularly during the holidays. See: Le Bijou: Ohio Wesleyan University Yearbook, 1924 (Delaware, OH: Ohio Wesleyan University, 1923); also, “Gospel Team to Conduct Service at Mt. Sterling,” Ohio State Lantern, December 18, 1924, and “Two Gospel Teams to be Sent by Center,” Ohio State Lantern, December 16, 1925.

\(^{134}\) Song, “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 26-31; Song Shangjie, “Yongyuan shifang,” Evangelism 7, no. 3 (1934): 17; Lyall, Biography of John Sung, 12.
suggesting Sung had some “doctrinal confusion” about the new birth. In so doing, Lyall provided his own theological consistency to Sung’s history, while maintaining the dichotomy of Union’s spiritual emptiness against Sung’s vibrant infilling with the Holy Spirit.

Other changes were more subtle. First, Lyall’s biography evoked the image of Harry Emerson Fosdick at UTS, something Sung had not done. But here was a personality later biographers would also incorporate into Sung’s experience in New York. Although Sung never had a class with Fosdick (nor is there evidence that they knew one another), it was a clever rhetorical device. Fosdick, as UTS professor, influential pastor, author of devotional books that sold millions of copies, and popular spokesperson for progressive Christianity, “towered above other pastors and theologians as \textit{the symbol} of American liberal Protestantism.” His presence in the story ensured that readers would associate UTS with theological modernism. Second, Lyall continued the aggrandizement of Sung’s achievements. Little changes by him magnified the spectacular in Sung. For example, in the first missionary account in 1928, W. B. Cole reported that Sung had read the Bible three times in the hospital. In 1933, Sung altered that to read forty times, but “not word for word.” Lyall followed Sung’s count, but dropped the phrase “not word for word,” leaving readers to marvel at Sung’s ability to digest the Bible from cover-to-cover

\footnote{Lyall, 12.}

\footnote{Gary Dorrien, \textit{The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950} (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 57 (italics mine).}
forty times, faster than once per week. Lyall also inserted part of Sung’s story that never circulated in *Wode jianzheng [My Testimony]*. He wrote that on the ship back to China, Sung took his Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Xi golden keys and tossed them into the ocean. Lyall—unaware that if the keys existed at all, they were replacements purchased by Henry Sloane Coffin just two weeks prior at the demand of Sung—interpreted the moment as a recapitulation of Paul’s own experience: “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.” It was a symbolic gesture that Lyall introduced, just as Sung had become for him a symbolic figure. In his biography, Sung’s story was more than history; it was a representation of the experiences, interests, and concerns of fundamentalism in the mid-twentieth century.

Subsequent biographers followed Lyall’s lead, and recreated the events at Union so as to convey contemporary messages. Timothy Tow’s *John Sung My Teacher* seized upon Sung’s separation from Union to settle disputes within his own Singapore Bible Presbyterian Church. Since the founders of the denomination, including Tow, were

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137 Lyall, 48.

138 The tossing of Sung’s emblems of worldly success into the ocean became a central story in his legacy. Over time, in fact, that vignette may have superseded the significance of the conversion story. In the Song Shangjie Memorial Hall in Putian, China, for instance, an enormous painting hangs depicting him throwing the symbols of his academic success into the ocean, rather than his encounter with Jesus at Union. However, like the conversion account, it is difficult to discern precisely what happened. The painting, for instance, shows Sung tossing his diplomas and not the keys into the water. Apparently in 1932 he told the story that way. A year before, a missionary reported that Sung took “his six diplomas and three ‘keys’” and threw them all into the Pacific ocean—grossly overstating the number of diplomas Sung would have had, as well as inflating the number of keys he had earned. And, of course, Lyall picked up that Sung sometimes spoke of throwing his two keys overboard. Just as often, though, Sung was silent on the matter when he described his transformation. It is impossible to know what happened on the boat. One wonders, though, if Sung simply kept the money from Coffin to help with expenses during his return trip, and never replaced the keys. In that case, nothing was thrown overboard, but the absence of the keys would be given spiritual significance. See: Anna Hockelman, “The Story of a Thirty-Nine Day Revival,” *The Latter Rain Evangel* 26, no. 10 (1935): 19-20; Jennie Hughes, *Bethel Heart Throbs of Revival* (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1931), 24; Song Shangjie, “Yongyuan shifang [Eternally Set Free],” *Evangelism* 7, no. 3 (1934), 17.
converted and called to ministry during Sung’s services in 1935, they consciously cast themselves as his heirs. In *The Singapore B-P Church Story*, Timothy Tow specifically identified Sung as one of the central roots that ultimately flowered as the Singapore Bible Presbyterian movement.  

It is not surprising, therefore, to discover that the Bible Presbyterians returned to the story of John Sung in the midst of a heated debate that was consuming the church in 1985. After thirty-five years of practicing a strict interpretation of the doctrine of separation, that not only excluded association with worldliness and sin, but also ecclesiastical separation from churches that were doctrinally impure, the B-P Church was racked by contention. Exactly which churches were theologically compromised? For decades they had assiduously avoided relationships with mainline denominations, but how was the church to respond to the fresh wave of charismatics who appeared in the 1970s? What about evangelicals who appeared to be theologically sound, such as Billy Graham who had recently visited Singapore, but whose actions violated the Bible Presbyterian interpretation of separation by cooperating with a variety of Protestants and even Roman Catholics? Such questions bedeviled the Singapore B-P Church in 1985 when Timothy Tow published *John Sung My Teacher*. Officially the book was published to celebrate the golden anniversary of Sung’s revivals in Singapore, but it came with a secondary agenda. The book was financed by the Life Bible Presbyterian Church in Singapore and had a clear message for the B-P faithful:

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139 Timothy Tow, *The Singapore B-P Church Story* (Singapore: Life Book Center, 1995), 15–16.
The story of John Sung is simply the story of Holy Spirit Revival, not of the spurious ecumenical sort currently infecting churches around the world [led by people like Billy Graham?]. John Sung unequivocally rebuked the tongue speakers, the liberals, modernists, apostates and ecumenists of his day. Were he alive today, he would not spare these false prophets the reproof of God’s Word.\textsuperscript{140}

In his absence, the book would have to do.

Tow’s biography is largely a retelling of Sung’s \textit{My Testimony}, but now enlisted for his own purposes. Remembering the outbreak of revival in Singapore under Sung’s ministry, for example, Tow pointed out that “[t]he phenomenon of tongue-speaking was wholly unknown nor any such manifestation of unbridled unruliness as [is] intruding on today’s charismatic meetings.”\textsuperscript{141} It was an effective means of channeling John Sung’s memory into a contemporary debate. Yet, in Tow’s able hands, more than Sung’s words and actions were used to make a point; he enlisted the setting. In dramatizing the importance of absolute separation, Tow focused on Sung’s break with UTS. The conflict was cast in cosmic dualities. UTS, Tow argued, was dead; its president was aptly named Coffin.\textsuperscript{142} The entire edifice of the seminary, “with her castle-like walls and high towers…appeared to be Satan’s stronghold. Her professors and students seemed like Satan’s hordes entrenched within.”\textsuperscript{143} There could be absolutely no compromise, the book graphically depicted, because as Sung discovered, “Whatever good he had done…was


\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 69.

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 75.
consumed by the cancerous cells of liberalism. John Sung resolved henceforth to hew a clean line.”

Tow’s biography was a call for the B-P Church to do likewise.

Despite his efforts to unify the denomination around the archetypical figure of John Sung, the Singapore B-P Church dissolved in 1988. Lamenting the collapse of the synod, Tow ironically returned to the language by which he had described Sung’s own separation from UTS and liberalism: “Freed from all constraints each B-P Church hewed its own line, mapped its own course.”

His attempt to redeploy the experience of John Sung in New York had failed to unify his denomination’s consciousness. The Singapore B-P churches only separated further from one another.

In 2003, cinematographers Yuan Zhiming and Xie Wenjie released The Cross: Jesus in China. It was a chronicle of underground Christianity. John Sung, along with Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee, was depicted as a forefather of the Chinese house church movement. The clip on Sung was short and focused. The details of Sung’s spiritual experiences in New York faded to the background. What was important to the filmmakers, who were leaders in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 but later escaped to the West and converted to Christianity, was that his hospitalization by UTS could be portrayed as a form of persecution—a vain attempt by hostile authorities to curb the work of God.

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144 Ibid., 109.

145 Timothy Tow, Singapore B-P Church, 226.

In the most recent works on Sung, historians Daniel Bays and Lian Xi do not exploit the story at Union in the same way as others.\textsuperscript{147} In fact, the entire episode in New York is comparatively muted. Bays writes not much more than, “[Sung] had a religious and psychological crisis due to the clash between his traditional Christian beliefs and the higher biblical criticism and liberal theology that surrounded him at Union.”\textsuperscript{148} The focus of their work has shifted from Sung’s conversion to his ministry—an important stream for what Bays calls “independent,” and Lian Xi “popular” Chinese Christianity. Yet ever since Sung narrated his experiences in New York in dualistic categories, there has been a temptation to inject him into polarized arenas and to fuse him with one group in opposition to another. Is that unwittingly happening again? By emphasizing Sung as a leader of independent or indigenous Chinese Christianity, is he being juxtaposed to Western missions or the Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment? It is a cautionary question. For although Daniel Bays and Lian Xi helpfully describe the various ways in which Sung maintained connections with Western missions, they nevertheless situate him as someone who was strictly “independent of foreign missions, autonomous in operations, and indigenous in ideas and leadership.”\textsuperscript{149} In practice, the two Christian worlds were intertwined in Sung’s life. On the one hand, he attacked Western missions,

\textsuperscript{147} Daniel Bays, \textit{A New History of Christianity} (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); and Lian Xi, \textit{Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China} (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{148} Bays, \textit{New History of Christianity}, 137. I would only contend that Bays has overestimated Sung’s traditional Christian faith when he arrived at UTS. Sung went to Union, at least in part, because they shared similar theological outlooks.

\textsuperscript{149} Bays, \textit{Christianity in China}, 309.
arranged many of his own revival campaigns, and drew his financial support from his Chinese audiences. On the other hand, his ministry was almost entirely circumscribed by Western missions. He held revivals in churches associated with Western denominations. He occasionally worked for Westerners in service of the gospel. He was even ordained by the American bishop J. Gowdy in the Methodist Episcopal Church, first as an assistant pastor near the beginning of his ministry (1930) and then as a full elder near the end (1938). Therefore, it is important to avoid characterizing Sung’s ministry with the same kind of dichotomous language as his conversion. His legacy in Chinese Christianity is too rich to be so narrowed.

**Conclusion**

The story of John Sung has appropriately revolved around his experience in New York in 1927—appropriate, because the interpretation of that event has been in perpetual negotiation. Putting together multiple layers of documentation reveals a fascinating process. The events in New York were bizarre and open to multiple interpretations, with no one explanation sufficient to vanquish its rivals. However, after Sung returned to China, he found in the newly divided context of American missions the necessary framework to build a meaningful description of what transpired in his life. He began to

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150 In a time when many Chinese Christian leaders moved independently of denominations, as Bays and Lian rightly point out, Sung’s decision to stay affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church elicited comment: “We are lucky…in that Dr. Sang [Sung] is staying by our Methodist church. Some of the most Christlike Chinese workers in these parts to-day are humble folk not connected with any big denomination. These things ought to make us think.” W.B. Cole to Frank T. Cartwright, July 24, 1929, *Missionary Files: Methodist Church, 1912-1949*, Hingwa, Cole, W. B. (continued) to Hawley, J. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999), roll 75. Sung is worthy of study, in part, precisely because he did not follow the path taken by so many others during the first half of the twentieth century.
experiment with a story of spiritual transformation that eventually hardened into a testimony of being born again. By formulating his experience in terms of new life, Sung began to draw effectively on the dualistic language that surrounded him. His new life was juxtaposed to the old; spiritual light to darkness; rebirth to stillbirth. The narrative was oppositional, forged in the particular settings of a polarized United States and China.

The binary logic of his narrative granted Sung’s experience in New York an extended life. Whenever disputes over mission, politics, or ecclesiology divided communities, Sung’s story at UTS tended to resurface. His narrative lasted because it was malleable. The ambiguity built into his extraordinary experiences allowed Sung and others to interpret the events not in some static or finalized form, but granted them liberty to describe and re-describe what happened in his life. Such flexibility, embedded in the very core of Sung’s testimony, has kept him as one of the most contemporary and compelling figures in Chinese Christianity.
When John Sung returned to China in 1927, he was uncertain about what precisely had happened to him in New York. Questions, both from within and from those he met at home, swirled about him. Was he crazy? Internal confusion mounted, and Sung expressed that externally by his seemingly contradictory religious behaviors. Within days of being back home with his family, Sung was down at the local temple using its bamboo sticks to divine the intention of the popular bodhisattva, Guanyin. He also plunged into reading the *Daodejing* and *Yijing* [*I Ching*], religious classics in China, and carefully kept notes on all that he discovered.¹ On the other hand, during that same first week home, Sung stood in *Zhili zhongxue* [Guthrie Memorial High School], the Methodist school from which he had graduated eight years before, and delivered a sermon to the student body. Sung was both dabbling in Chinese traditional religion and groping for ways to communicate the Christian faith.

By the time his preaching ministry ended thirteen years later, the confusion and bumbling of those first days back in China were long forgotten. His fame as a Christian preacher was firmly established. Foreigners saw the “Billy Sunday of China” in his

¹ Song Shangjie, November 14, 1927, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore (henceforth, SSD, TTC); Song Shangjie, November 15, 1927, SSD, TTC. I am inclined to view this period of religious experimentation as the period when Sung delved into the Chinese religious traditions. In *Wode jianzheng* [*My Testimony*], he told his audience that he immersed himself in Buddhism and the *Daodejing* while at UTS. No evidence exists for such religious dabbling in New York. Instead, I suggest *My Testimony* moved his religious curiosity and experimentation from China back to New York, because it would fit better with his claim of being unconverted at the time.
restless energy, searching harangues against sin, and in his unpredictable and theatrical presentations of the gospel.² Among the Chinese he was not cast in anyone else’s mold; he was the mold! If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Sung was positively adulated by the myriad of young evangelists who tried to mimic his style—even learning to stand with the one heel resting on the platform while the rest of the foot lifted up toward heaven.³ Since then, book after book has tried to capture the potency of Sung’s preaching. Authors have reached for the biggest names in mass evangelism to provide readers some kind of adequate comparison: John Sung was the Dwight L. Moody, A. B. Simpson, R. A. Torrey, Henry Jowett, Harry Emerson Fosdick, or Billy Graham of Asia.⁴ Or, more recently, Sung has been presented as a pulpiteer whose fame should equal or even exceed that of Yong-gi Cho.⁵ Sung was celebrated, first and foremost, for his extraordinary preaching.

How did that happen? If, despite the popular image, Sung did not return from the United States as a fiery convert ordained by God and ready to set China ablaze with the gospel, then what did actually transpire? This chapter will show how Sung transitioned


from being a preacher of divine mysteries to a herald of salvation. Revivalism, it will be argued, granted Sung a powerful tool for performing and presenting the gospel in ways that were modern, yet also cognizant of traditional Chinese spiritual interests.

**Learning How to Preach**

Any examination of John Sung’s ministry must be attuned to his preaching, noting how his messages evolved over the years. This is a more complicated task than it initially sounds. Before Sung became a celebrity, there was little impetus to capture any of his sermons. Sermon outlines in his journal, a few scattered reports about his preaching, and a handful of transcribed messages must suffice. The record is spotty, but the evidence is sufficient to sketch Sung’s evolution from a somewhat confused religious seeker to, arguably, China’s most powerful preacher. This section explores how he—and his messages—underwent that profound transformation.

**The First Years in China**

Although confused about his own religious identity, Sung could stand and preach in the Guthrie Memorial High School days after he returned to China because he relied on a sermon that he first preached in the United States. It did not take him long, however, to branch out and start experimenting with new material. At that point he lacked a clear theological center, so his earliest messages varied widely. Many reflected the ideological spirit of China at the time, and Sung crafted awkward presentations on “(1)

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6 See chapter 1.
Humble-ism; (2) Love of God-ism; (3) Sacrifice-ism; [and] (4) Forget yourself-ism.”

Others expressed his reverse culture shock, as he condemned the unhygienic practices of his nation and even his father. It was only after he started to take sides in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy, as described in the previous chapter, that Sung discovered a crucial strategy in gaining people’s trust and a platform from which he could speak. One should not assume, however, that attacking modernism was his exclusive message. Sung was too creative to be limited to a single theme. Instead he crafted sermons, for example, that piggybacked on the Guomindang’s (KMT) political rhetoric which permeated Fujian in the wake of the Nationalist army’s recent victory in the region. He altered Sun Yat-sen’s “Three Principles of the People” \[sanmin zhuyi\], and offered his audience “Christ’s Three Principles of the People” \[jidu sanmin zhuyi\].

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7 Song Shangjie, November 8, 1927, SSD, Trinity Theological College, Singapore. Sung, like the majority of Chinese, either did not know or chose not to heed the Chinese social critic, Hu Shi. Hu Shi became so frustrated with the multiplication of “-isms” in China during the first quarter of the century, he urged people to cease speaking about ideology altogether. “Improving one kind of bean, one strain of cotton, or one breed of silk worms,” Hu Shi pleaded, “is better than a million tons of essays talking about ‘isms.’” Few listened. Whether entirely Western or not, ideologies appeared modern and therefore seemed to hold the key for transforming China. See Peter Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 173-184; Charles W. Hayford, *To the People: James Yen and Village China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 64.

8 Song Shangjie, November 6, 1927, SSD, Trinity Theological College, Singapore; Song Shangjie, November 9, 1927, SSD, Trinity Theological College, Singapore. More than culture shock may have been at work, as Sung had imbibed the Chinese Christian Student Association’s emphasis on hygiene as a dimension of the gospel. Nonetheless, his diary entries immediately upon his return captured how he was jarred by what had previously been normal. For instance, at a wedding banquet he complained bitterly about people spitting melon seeds on the floor. Their behavior would only make it harder to clean up. With a note of self-congratulation he noted in his diary, “I spit the shells into a small dish and then cleaned it with a towel.” November 9, 1927.


10 Song Shangjie, November 17, 1927, SSD, Trinity Theological College, Singapore.
Sung never reported how hijacking the sacrosanct language of the KMT for his own sermon went over, but he did eventually run afoul of the Nationalist government. By the beginning of 1928 Sung came to the attention of the KMT as a new teacher in the mission schools of Hinghwa. It is unclear what prompted the party to notice him. Sung circulated at least two explanations. Sometimes he said that his sermons appeared to transplant the official ideology of the state, and therefore raised opposition. Other times he indicated that he drew the KMT’s ire because he condemned the party’s requirement that students bow to the portrait of Sun Yat-sen. Quite possibly both happened, though a third possibility, less framed as a form of religious persecution and more in terms of the political realities of the day, may explain the KMT’s interest in Sung. After the KMT did an about face and purged the communists from its ranks in April of 1927, the party was especially vigilant to root out the communists’ influence. Local KMT officials carefully monitored schools, since communists had been the most effective in recruiting members and organizing protests among students. Sung may have become a person of interest because the KMT tended to suspect that intellectuals working in rural China must be

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12 Song Tianzhen, *Shi-er fude de riji* (Kowloong, Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 2006), 47.
communists. Sung, with his Ph.D. in chemistry from an American university but working at a small high school in China’s hinterland, would certainly fit the vague profile of someone suspicious. Regardless of the reason(s), the state’s intrusion into the school helped to push Sung out the door, even as the lure of evangelistic ministry pulled him. By June 1928, any reservations about his religious identity were gone. Sung left the school and dedicated all his time to Christian ministry.

His early years of work were spent in itinerant preaching. Appointed as a Conference Evangelist in 1928, Sung invested most of his time preaching within the Hinghwa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church under the direction of the matriarch of the missionary community, Elizabeth Brewster. In his travels, he regularly spoke against idol worship, and called the unconverted to be saved. His preaching schedule was intense, demanding him to speak up to ten times in a day as he swiftly moved from village to village with the Good News.

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14 Sung consistently expressed his desire to minister in his journal. See, for example, Song Shangjie, November 16, 1927, SSD, TTC; Song Shangjie, November 18-19, 1927, SSD, TTC.

15 Elizabeth Brewster to Dr. Cartwright, May 1, 1930, Missionary Files, United Methodist Archives and History Center, Madison, NG (henceforth, UMC); *Official Minutes of the 25th Session of the Hinghwa Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, November 19-25, 1929, 142.

16 Song Shangjie, *Peilingji* [Devotional Messages]. (Hong Kong: Bellman House, n.d.), 58-66. Sung told his audiences that he spoke up to ten times a day. Whether that is an exaggeration or not, he certainly preached frequently and often several times a day.
expended his excess energy by serving on the Executive Board of the Conference and the Bible School Committee. A small band of young adults were drawn into the swirl of his activities, which became known as something of a “traveling Bible School,” and by 1929 the missionaries spoke about this cluster of young people as a positive, if naively optimistic, movement within the church.

Frank Cartwright, one missionary who briefly worked with Sung before becoming the Board of Foreign Missions’ Secretary for China, Japan, Korea and East Asia, was especially enthusiastic. When he assumed his new post in New York, Cartwright vigorously supported the development of new leaders in the Hinghwa Conference. The paucity of youth moving into Christian ministry haunted him, even prompting Cartwright to ask one of the bishops in China, “Was I more engrossed with organization than with

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17 Official Minutes of the 24th Session of the Hinghwa Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, November 14-20, 1928; Official Minutes of the 25th Session of the Hinghwa Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, November 19-25, 1929; Official Minutes of the 26th Session of the Hinghwa Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, November 11-17, 1930.

18 F. Stanley Carson to Dr. Cartwright, May 7, 1929, Missionary Files, UMC; W.B. Cole to Rev. F. T. Cartwright, March 25, 1930, Missionary Files, UMC; Official Minutes of the 26th Session of the Hinghwa Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, November 11-17, 1930, 266.

19 Frank T. Cartwright to Early R. Hibbard, August 7, 1935, Missionary Files: Methodist Church, 1912-1949, N. China, Clay, E. H. (continued) to Wen Middle School (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1999), roll 70.
‘things of the Spirit’? When he heard of Sung’s vitality and influence, Cartwright likely stepped in, and helped the Hinghwa Conference expand the young man’s work.

In December 1930, the Methodist leadership sent Sung to attend the East China Christian Home Forward Movement Conference in Huzhou, Zhejiang province. Sung enthusiastically embraced the message he heard there, and left believing God had “equipped me with materials I can contribute to [the Christian Home Forward Movement].” Upon his return, Sung was also commissioned to study the rural reconstruction work of Yan Yangchu [James Yen]. Yan had grabbed the Christian world’s attention when he held the first Literacy Institute in Dingxian, Hebei province. Yan had invited ninety delegates to spend two weeks studying his rural reconstruction project in late April and early May 1930. Guests were so impressed that thereafter, “all future church efforts in rural reconstruction bore the imprint of James Yen and his colleagues.”

Apparently, the Hinghwa Conference’s interests were piqued enough by the reports to send Sung more than 1,000 miles north to take a deeper look. Sung, however, left

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20 Frank Cartwright to Uncle John [Gowdy], December 22, 1931, Bishop Correspondence, UMC.

21 No direct evidence exists that Cartwright was the one who pushed the Conference to expand Sung’s ministry, though he clearly conveyed his positive impression about him to the missionaries in several letters. For example: “Dr. Sang’s [sic] work is of keen interest to me and on several occasions it has been the subject of talks and addresses…. It is a joy to be able to report that a well-trained and eager young man is giving himself to the direct and exclusive business of evangelism.” Such indirect influence could well explain why Sung was designated to represent the church at national events. See, Frank T. Cartwright to F. Stanley Carson, May 10, 1929, Missionary Files, UMC.

22 Song Shangjie, December 9, 1930, SSD, TTC. It is important to note that at this early stage of his career, Sung was exploring his faith through the female side of Methodist missionary tradition. His relationship with Elizabeth Brewster and his engagement with home life must have been formative. Perhaps his success among women, which will be explored in chapter 4, is at least partially rooted in these early experiences.

Dingxian after only a few days. At his departure in January 1931, Sung was aware that he was forfeiting the opportunity to do “on-the-spot useful work like Yan Yangchu,” but believed that God was calling him to return home to lift up the cross.\textsuperscript{24}

By that point, Sung’s identity had coalesced around his evangelistic ministry. He did not denigrate rural reconstruction as social gospel claptrap, but saw his own vocation elsewhere.\textsuperscript{25} His exit from the Methodist school and his appointment as a Conference Evangelist had enforced the notion that Sung was first and foremost a preacher. But what was it that he was proclaiming?

\textbf{A Curator of Divine Mysteries}

Throughout his journeys, both in Fujian and beyond, Sung was encountering a distinctive spiritual syntax that heavily shaped his sermons. He repeatedly recorded in his journal stories in which the supernatural world penetrated the natural world. He jotted down people’s dreams that acted as heavenly messages. Evil spirits were noted as regular afflictors of the sick, and ghosts and angels appeared in a variety of contexts. Healings, visits to heaven, and an audible voice giving divine direction were normal for the

\textsuperscript{24} Song Shangjie, January 9, 1931, SSD, TTC.

\textsuperscript{25} Sung’s early departure from Dingxian has been interpreted as confirmation of his rejection of the social gospel. The record, however, suggests otherwise. Sung’s appearance at the National Christian Council’s Home Forward Movement, and then his trip to Dingxian suggest that Sung’s theological identity was still fluid. He was certainly not a fundamentalist bent on separating from modernism. On the contrary, he seemed interested in the social vision of the NCC and Yan Yangchu, even though he did not choose to remain in Dingxian. Francis Jones, who worked with Sung in Hinghwa after he returned from China said that Sung’s theology “did not reveal any…theological stand.” In fact, Jones’ judgment was that Sung “was never systematic enough in his thinking to be an out-and-out-fundamentalist.” See: Francis Jones, “John Sung,” \textit{China Bulletin} 5, no. 4 (February 1955): 2.
Christians Sung met. If his scientific training had ever eroded a notion that a supernatural dimension was somehow separated from this present world, his early years in China fused them back together. For Sung, the presence of extraordinary events in someone’s testimony is what lent the story credence. Increasingly, therefore, he turned his attention to such supernatural activities in his own life. He noted, for instance, that while he was at the National Christian Council’s Christian Home Forward Movement, the most significant thing he experienced there was his failure to introduce himself properly. When one of the leaders asked Sung to make his own introduction, he recorded: “I only gave my name, nothing else. For suddenly I felt my head was as big as the whole world and my teeth weighed a ton, so it was extremely difficult to speak. This kind of spirit-

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26 Song Shangie, *The Diary of John Sung*, 39-79. To use published versions of John Sung’s diaries involves risk. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, “Kuo kuo Song Shangjie yanjiude lingyu: shiliaude laiyuan [Widening the Domain of Song Shangjie Studies: Origins of Historical Data],” unpublished paper, Conference on John Sung’s Legacy in Singapore and Malaysia, Trinity Theological College, Singapore, September 27, 2011, has convincingly demonstrated that the published works fail to distinguish between what is Sung’s material and what is borrowed or retold from other sources. With access to Sung’s journals, which Poon did not have, I have determined that his assessment is correct. In addition, I can now add that the text that does come from Sung’s journals is incredibly condensed. Comparing actual pages of Sung’s journals with what is published from those dates reveals a massive pruning project, so that multiple pages of Sung’s actual journals are “cherry-picked” for a few choice quotations, and then put into publication. The published journals, therefore, are not a good reflection of Sung’s actual journals. However, they do have some usefulness. If one is familiar with the literature on Sung, one can quickly identify which sources are not from Sung’s own journals. Even Poon, without access to the original diaries, could detect the interloping texts. Once those accretions are identified and discarded, one is working with genuine extracts of Sung’s journal—even if they are very selectively chosen. These portions give some useful information, thought they largely lack context. Hence, I do not use these published versions often, but when I do—as in this case about the spiritual realities that confronted Sung in Fujian—I do so with confidence that the material is original, and from Sung.

27 This seems to be the time when Sung’s testimony about his transformation at UTS began to recover, and even emphasize, the supernatural dimension of his experiences in New York. For instance, in his testimony in 1931 he told his audiences for the first time about children who had been writing the word “rest” before he was removed to the hospital. Sung also revealed that while he was in the asylum God spoke directly with him, he had “a revelation of everything on heaven and on earth,” and that such ecstasies were countered by a devil that would come everyday to tempt him. See: Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 30.
world [lingjie] experience is truly precious.”\footnote{28} The attention Sung began to lavish on such experiences was well timed, as the modernist-fundamentalist controversy dropped from its initial boil to a low simmer in 1931. In that less hostile environment, Sung’s sermons needed a new center.\footnote{29} Stories about Union Theological Seminary’s mistreatment temporarily disappeared. His focus moved to Bloomingdale Hospital, the insane asylum. For it was there, he made plain to those who heard him preach, that he penetrated the veil of this world, and the mysteries of God were given to him.

“These are not my words,” Sung informed his audiences, “When I was locked in the mental asylum God’s Spirit personally led me.”\footnote{30} Far from covering up or shying away from talking about his hospitalization, he repeatedly brought his experience in the mental asylum to everyone’s attention. In his first transcribed sermons, Sung validated his messages by pointing out the circumstances under which he received them: “This teaching was given to me when I was in the wilderness, the asylum.”\footnote{31} He was so certain of the appeal of such a special revelation that he suggested “many people wish they could live in the asylum with me, because they dearly long for this kind of teaching.”\footnote{32} Sung turned his diagnosis of mental illness into his greatest draw. His hospitalization was the

\footnote{28} Song Shangjie, December 7, 1930, SSD, TTC.

\footnote{29} Kevin Xiyi Yao, \textit{The Fundamentalist Movement Among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920-37} (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 2003).


\footnote{32} Ibid., 19. For a similar sentiment, see: Song Shangjie, “Chuangshiji yu shizijia [Genesis and the Cross],” \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]} 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 32.
ultimate evidence of his ability to “see/break through [kanpo]” the world. Ordinary people, including the learned doctors in the mental hospital, were blind to such extraordinary business. Drawing on a standard trope from popular Chinese fiction, Sung told the story of his hospitalization in a way that condemned the materialism of the world, while confirming his own spiritual genius. The experts wrongly assumed Sung was insane, because they were unable to penetrate reality in the way he did. Flattering his audiences, Sung told his appreciative listeners that only they had the spiritual insight to recognize the truth: the deepest mysteries of the Bible were supernaturally revealed to John Sung in New York.

At the second meeting of the National Christian Council’s Five Year Movement that was convened in Shanghai, March 30 – April 3, 1931, Sung showcased his idiosyncratic interpretation of the Bible in his preaching. He ascended the platform in

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33 Song Shangjie, “Matai fuyin di liu zhang [Matthew Chapter Six],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 9-13. This verb entered Sung’s vocabulary as a common way to express his ability to penetrate beyond the world as it is presented, and see the spiritual reality beneath it.

34 Sung’s emphasis on being rejected by the world because of his supernatural knowledge was a standard literary device from the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fiction of China from roughly 1910-1937. E. Perry Link explains that the young, male heroes of these popular novels were regularly introduced to readers by a revelation of “his great powers of understanding and sympathy, especially concerning the natural world. But ordinary society does not recognize the rare genius. He is isolated, and often impoverished. He rejects the normal world because he understands higher things; the normal world rejects him because it does not.” Link goes on to add that the heroine is the only person who can recognize and appreciate such genius. Perhaps it should not be surprising, therefore, that Sung’s audience—as will be explored more fully in chapter four—was predominantly female. E. Perry Link, Jr., Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Cities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 65-75.

35 Note how Sung’s involvement with the NCC belies the stereotypical image of him returning to China as a beligerent fundamentalist. The lines between the modernists and fundamentalists were not so tightly demarcated as one might imagine. At this point in his career, at least, Sung felt comfortable working with and even for people assumed to be his theological opponents. For more on the complexity of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy in China, see: Kevin Xiyi Yao, The Fundamentalist Movement Among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920-37.
Shanghai only a few weeks after he had caused a stir in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, by igniting a revival in the Methodist church and schools there. In hindsight, that Nanchang revival would be designated as the beginning of Sung’s revivalistic career, but it was really only because the event in Shanghai brought what happened in Nanchang to national attention. Five thousand representatives from multiple denominations were in Shanghai to commit to the six aims of the Five Year Movement: evangelism, religious education, literacy, Christianizing the home, stewardship, and church and youth. Unable to preach in Mandarin, Sung had to rely on an interpreter to communicate his extraordinary messages to the assembly. Lu Zu, someone noted, not only had to help make Sung’s Hinghwa dialect understandable to the audience, but sometimes she also had the challenge of explaining the meaning behind his esoteric biblical expositions.

When his first of six sermons on Genesis 1 opened with, “This afternoon’s theme is something I don’t even know, because it is very mysterious,” the audience could be assured of a good hour more of cocked heads and furrowed brows. Sung’s early messages were filled with unique allegories. In this particular case, he drew parallels between each day of creation and the “seven children of the Kingdom of God,” who

36 Zhenguang [True Light] 30, no. 5 (May 1931): 80-82

37 L.D. Cio, “Five Year Movement,” China Christian Year Book 1931, edited by Frank Rawlinson (Shanghai: Christian Literature Society, 1931), 127. Note how many of these Sung had been drawn into during the preceding year.

38 Zhenguang 30, no. 5 (May 1931): 80-82.

appeared in the rest of the book of Genesis.\(^{40}\) For instance, on the first day of creation God created light and separated it from the darkness (Gen. 1:3-5). Sung explained that those verses referred to the first child in God’s kingdom: Abel. Abel represented light and humility, whereas Cain was full of darkness and pride. The two were literally separated from one another (Gen. 4). In a similar way the fifth day of creation, which described the creation of fish and birds (Gen. 1:20-23), corresponded to Isaac’s experience in life. Isaac plunged to the depths like a fish when he was bound and about to be sacrificed by his father (Gen. 22), but he also soared to the heights like a bird when he received God’s promise that a savior would come through his descendants.

Subsequent sermons added more and more layers to this interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis. The next day, for example, Sung pushed the parallels further. Genesis 1 was also a template for the first seven chapters of the Gospel of John: the first day God created light, which summoned images of light and darkness, Cain and Abel. But it also signified how the true light entered the world, and was rejected by it (John 1:5). The fifth day, God created fish and birds, which were symbols of Isaac’s life experiences, and also indications of how the crippled man in John 5 felt as he moved from a lower to higher existence when Jesus healed him. By the end of the series, the sermons were getting both more convoluted and yet easier to follow. The methodology was consistent. The seven days of creation described at the beginning of the Genesis, were the “key” to the

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
mysteries of the whole Bible. In his series of sermons, Sung used those seven days to explain many things: the creation account summed up the entire book of Genesis; it clarified the meaning of the first seven chapters of John; the seven days of creation acted as a concise summary of the seven narrative blocks Sung identified as comprising the Old and New Testaments; they also forecast all of church history; and, in his final presentation, Genesis 1 prefigured his own spiritual narrative, which moved incrementally from darkness to rest. Amazed by the comprehensiveness of the first chapter of the Bible, Sung voiced his awe, “This chapter is extremely mysterious. Too bad so many people today look down on this chapter. They have eyes corrupted by secular ways. Thank God, when I was in the desert (the insane asylum), he gave me this kind of revelation, and allowed me to see things clearly.”

Throughout these early sermons, the goal was not revival, but to intensify his audience’s sense of wonder at the mysterious nature of the Bible. What appeared so straightforward in the text was, in fact, imbued with layer upon layer of meaning. Sung repeatedly emphasized that each stroke in the text had significance, and as those

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43 Song Shangjie, “Chuangshijide qi xiaohai [The Seven Children of Genesis],” 15.
meanings were brought to the surface the listeners were expected to marvel at how God had buried such treasures in plain sight. Thus, the passage that functioned as a lightning rod for the fundamentalist-modernist conflict—the creation account in Genesis—played a different role in Sung’s sermonic repertoire. He did not try to prove that the biblical creation account was consonant with modern science, like so many fundamentalists. His attention fell elsewhere. Every sermon certainly implied that Genesis 1 must be inspired, for no other explanation could account for the surprising parallels or precise forecasts of the future that he uncovered for his audiences, but his more explicit agenda was to usher those in attendance into reverent awe.

For this purpose, Sung did draw on his scientific education. Chemistry could illustrate the profundity of the biblical mysteries. For example, Sung helped explain the connection between the second day of creation and Jesus changing water into wine in John chapter two, via a chemical formula. On the second day of creation, God separated the waters—waters below and waters above—and named the vault between them “sky,” or in Chinese, “heaven [tian].” Sung explained, “Water is H$_2$O. If you want it to become wine, you need to add carbon, so wine is C$_6$H$_{12}$O$_6$. Water originally belongs to the earth [i.e., water below]. Carbon is found in the heavens [tiankong]. Now when they are

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46 This, too, was a new element in Sung’s evolution as a preacher. One of the earliest reports about his sermons says explicitly, “He seldoms [sic] uses his science for illustration in his preaching and he stays squarely in the Bible.” W. B. Cole to Frank T. Cartwright, July 24, 1929, Missionary Files, UMC.
brought together wine is made. This is the meaning of the Word made flesh.”47 Whether or not his audience found his illustration of the incarnation enlightening, Sung made his greater point: the Bible was filled with hidden meanings.

Certainly not everyone was impressed with his arcane explication of scripture. One listener to his sermons on Genesis sent Sung a note complaining, “During these days of Bible exposition you have offered far-fetched interpretations, and misunderstood the Bible at many points.”48 It was not the first negative evaluation he received. Only weeks after his return to China, Sung’s father gave a withering evaluation of one of his son’s enigmatic messages. He compared it unfavorably to his own elucidation of the Word of God.49 Some of the missionaries in Hinghwa, too, noted that his sermons were clumsy, and believed other ministers in the Conference were more gifted preachers and held greater promise.50 Francis Jones, former principal of the Methodist high school, saw Sung as “theologically immature, delighting in torturous allegorical exegesis, and constantly inclined to go off on tangents.”51 Even those who were more appreciative of Sung’s ministry were wont to comment on the oddity of his sermons. “Mr. Sung has great spiritual power and a cordial attitude. His themes are not according to current practices,

47 Song Shangjie, “Chuangshiji yu yuehan fuyin [Genesis and the Gospel of John],” 20. The translation of tiānkōng as “heavens” is admittedly loose, as it is normally rendered air, but I chose to translate it this way in order to capture the connection Sung observed, and the thrust of his argument.

48 Song Shangjie, Shi’er fude de riji [The Journal Once Lost], compiled by Song Tianzhen (Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 1995), 103.

49 Song Shangjie, November 13, 1927, SSD, Trinity Theological College, Singapore.

50 F. Stanley Carson to Dr. Frank Cartwright, May 27, 1929, Missionary Files, UMC.

but he brings novelty into full play.” Sung did not begin as a revivalist preacher imploring his audience to convert before it was too late, but as a wandering curator of divine mysteries.

A Second Conversion: Finding a New Way to Preach

John Sung’s shift from being a messenger of mysteries to a preacher of salvation happened in 1931. In April of that year, Sung had spoken confidently that when he had returned to China in 1927, “God’s Spirit was with me. I knew something about sanmin zhuyi, socialism, and science—they were all empty. Only the cross of Jesus had power to save a person’s soul.” It would appear from that statement that Sung believed he had been preaching salvation since the time of his return. But just three months later, in July 1931, he told his story in the same auditorium very differently: “The three years I spent working in Hinghwa are a warning. At that time, I spent day and night busily applying learning to instruct people…but in the end it had no effect. But now I am careful. I do not know anything else, but Jesus and him crucified on the cross.”

Sung perceived that something dramatic had shifted in his preaching ministry between April and July 1931, and he recounted it according to the dictates of his newly adopted revivalism. He felt compelled to speak about his transition from one style of preaching to another as an instantaneous and dramatic conversion. All his former

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53 Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” Shengjie zhinan yuankan 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 31.

54 Song Shangjie, “Make di’erzhang [Mark Chapter Two],” Shengjie zhinan yuukan 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 19.
ministerial work now appeared to be no better than rubbish; it belonged to the old life of
death from which he had been saved: “Hitherto my work was haphazard and aimless. I
was struggling in the tide of modernism, being knocked about here and there, and did not
know how to get out. It was only at Nanchang [1931] that my sky cleared up and I saw
light before my way.” Such a testimony, of course, sat incomprehensibly with his claims
of having left modernism when he was at Union Theological Seminary in 1927.

Nonetheless, he held to it for the rest of his career because it expressed something vitally
important: his preaching was radically altered in 1931.

What caused the seismic shift? Biographers have assumed something pivotal
happened at Nanchang in March 1931, as Sung himself testified. There are two problems,
however, with that date.

The first obstacle is reconciling the messages Sung preached in Nanchang with
the characteristics of revivalism. Russell Richey has proposed that revival preaching, and
revivalism more broadly, is based on ten ingredients, which together “yield the most
adequate definition” for revivalism. The first is *pietism*—specifically the experiential
dimension of religious life. The second is a *theology conducive to aggressive proselytism*.
The nature and task of revivalism’s theology is to foster evangelism. Third, a *soteriology
of crisis* is present. In other words, conversion is central to revivalism. A fourth ingredient
is the *assumption of declension*. A purer spiritual past suggests a reachable future. Fifth,

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55 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 110.
56 Ibid.
modern revivals require crowds. Revivalism can be distinguished from revitalization at this juncture. Revitalization can happen piecemeal and over an extended period of time, as happened during the reign of Charlemagne. A modern revival, by contrast, is “an event, a visible happening, a species of crowd behavior.” Fifth, revivalism presumes voluntarism, the right of individuals to will or to choose what they believe. Seventh, modern revivals are performative; they dramatize salvation. These performances are orchestrated by a charismatic leader, the eighth ingredient in a revival. The ninth indicator of revivalism is the conviction that the revival is the work of the Holy Spirit. Tenth, revivalism requires a communication network, a way to let others know what wonders God has wrought. These are the ten constitutive ingredients of modern revivalism. Insofar as Sung was preaching esoteric sermons in Nanchang, as outlined in “A Curator of Divine Mysteries,” his messages hardly fulfilled Richey’s basic conditions.58

At best, certain features of Sung’s cryptic messages could, in hindsight, be labeled as proto-revivalist. For example, the soteriology of crisis and its concomitant call for an immediate decision was possibly prefigured in the way Sung forced his audiences either to side with him as having received heavenly revelations or reject him as insane. His rhetoric offered listeners no middle ground. Similarly, his exegesis had a cumulative


58 None of Sung’s sermons from Nanchang were preserved. In his journal from that time, however, he promised to continue preaching the message he was delivering there (See: Song Shangjie, March 5, 1931, SSD, TTC.) On that basis, I assume that the messages that were preserved in Shanghai less than a month later are adequate representations of what Sung preached in Nanchang.
effect that was not unlike what happens in a jeremiad. The way Sung suggested that the Bible might have another, yet another, and then still another hidden meaning built into the audience a kind of discontentment with the present. The result was a nagging sense that there might always be something more, something better, some fresh experience of God. These potential points of continuity with revivalism did not make him a revivalist preacher in Nanchang, however. They were, at best, a foreshadowing of what was to come.

The second roadblock to making the services in Nanchang the source for Sung’s stylistic change is the fact that Sung left there still content with his messages of mystery. In April 1931, only weeks after he left Nanchang, Sung expressed satisfaction with how his arcane sermons had been vehicles of God’s Word. It was only in July 1931 that his tone shifted dramatically, and Sung repudiated his former manner of preaching. What happened, then, in May or June? What caused the transformation?

The change came through Sung’s intersection with the Bethel Mission. Shi Meiyu [Mary Stone] and Jennie Hughes, the co-directors of Bethel, operated from an important node in an international holiness-revival network. They were well connected. Shi Meiyu was a minor celebrity, as she and Kang Cheng [Ida Kahn] were the first two Chinese women to earn medical degrees from a Western university (Michigan, 1896).\(^{59}\) Shi returned to China as a crown jewel for the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the

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\(^{59}\) Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010), 132.
Methodist Episcopal Church. While working in the Elizabeth Skelton Danforth Memorial Hospital, Shi became close friends with Jennie Hughes. Hughes was the daughter of George Hughes, the editor of the influential periodical *Guide to Holiness*. Their decision to leave the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1920 over its perceived theological modernism, therefore, was a public affair. Their exit was not only grand, but it also redirected financial gifts that WFMS leaders believed would have been given to the church. Their well-known names, their decision to locate their independent work in Shanghai, and their need to communicate with financial supporters through letters, magazines, and booklets made Bethel a hub for holiness revivalism.

Between 1925 and 1928, for example, Bethel was at the center of four major revivals. The first, and most well known, happened just shortly after the May Thirtieth Incident in 1925. A. Paget Wilkes, a member of the Church of England who founded the Japan Evangelistic Band, dared to visit Shanghai despite the fury over British policemen gunning down Chinese protesters. His holiness sermons lighted something like Pentecostal fire in the charged atmosphere of the city, and convinced Shi Meiyu to begin leading her own revival services. The Quaker-cum-Nazarene-cum-Pilgrim Holiness preacher Seth Cook Rees held services at Bethel during his worldwide preaching tour of

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61 Rev. Thomas S. Brock to Miss Lewis, May 31, 1921, Biographical Files, Jennie Hughes, UMC; Clotilda L. McDowell and Evelyn Riley Nicholson to Dear Secretary, June 24, 1921, Biographical Files, Jennie Hughes, UMC.

In 1927, Edward Carter, an African American missionary who started the Holiness Church of India, visited Shanghai when his son’s typhoid fever forced him to abort his return to the United States and disembark in China. Bethel helped to promote Carter’s impromptu revivals, which by their successes led to the establishment of several new holiness churches in China. Then, in 1928, Bethel welcomed the Methodist George Whitefield Ridout of Asbury Theological Seminary to reawaken people from their spiritual slumbers through his preaching. Such high profile services were indicative of the fact that Shi and Hughes had become prominent figures in a multiethnic, interdenominational, and international network of holiness revivalism.

Precisely what these two leading women saw or heard in Sung is unclear when he preached at Bethel in April 1931. It may have been his charisma on stage, the reports of what God had done through his services in Nanchang, or maybe the fact that at 29 he would add some maturity—a kind of ballast—to their youthful organization. Just as likely, Shi and Hughes heard something important in his sermons on biblical mysteries. For although Sung’s early esoteric sermons were not traditional fare for revivalism, that did not mean they were insipid or without effect. Their obscurity seldom deterred people.

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66 Jennie Hughes, Bethel Heart Throbs of Revival, 1931 (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1931).
On the contrary, Sung found a number in his audiences who were eager, like their Buddhist and Daoist neighbors, to penetrate to deeper meanings embedded in a holy text. Students, too, appreciated Sung’s handling of biblical material. His methodology showed them that scripture was incredibly coherent even if its messages might appear contradictory. The implication was that all the questions which troubled them had a solution. Idiosyncrasies and inconsistencies with which many students were familiar, and in some cases well versed through anti-Christian literature, probably had an explanation. They merely lacked the key to unlock the sacred writings. Sung’s mysteries made the Bible highly desirable. His ability to offer at least twelve different spiritual truths, even from such innocuous texts as, “When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home” (Mark 2:1), implicitly promised audiences that God’s Word always had something more for those who were still hungry and thirsty. If other biblical expositions could not satisfy, then Sung’s parting the veil of the text to reveal innumerable delicacies could awaken a profound spiritual hunger—an insatiable appetite

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for more.\textsuperscript{70} No wonder observers noted that wherever he traveled Bible sales soared.\textsuperscript{71} Whatever the reason, Shi and Hughes compiled his talks from the Five Year Movement meeting, and for only the second time, published an entire issue of the \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]} on one subject, namely Sung’s sermons.\textsuperscript{72}

The first special issue had appeared only two months earlier and announced the formation of the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band.\textsuperscript{73} It contained the testimonies of Ji Zhiwen [Andrew Gih], Li Daorong [Philip Lee], Nie Ziying [Lincoln Nieh], and Lin Jinkang [Frank Ling], and how they were inspired by a visit of evangelists from Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky. In conscious reproduction of what they saw in their American guests, these young men formed the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band to “work in China for two years, and then follow the Lord’s leading as to where to minister, possibly making a trip around Asia, and then afterwards to every country in the world.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{70} Sung saw his task as making the gospel digestible. He suggested, for instance, that people often looked at the words in the bible and saw nothing appetizing, it was like gazing at the shell of a peanut. Only those like Sung, who knew something delicious was inside the shell, could peel the rough exterior, get to the delicacy inside, and share the bounty. See, Song Shangjie, “Make disizhang [Mark Chapter Four],” \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan} 3, no. 11 (November 1931): 13.


\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]} 3, no. 6 (June 1931).

\textsuperscript{73} The Chinese word “band” should not be associated with a musical group or a Wesleyan small group for intensive discipleship. A band referred to a team of evangelists.

The issue was filled with fanfare, and described in copious detail how the evangelistic team was commissioned. The Bethel church was covered in various scriptural texts like, “Ask and you will receive,” “Get up and cross the Jordan!” and “I am with you always until the end of the Age.” To symbolize the larger support of the Christian community, dignitaries from various Christian organizations joined the team on the platform. The dedication ceremony was strategically held on the tenth anniversary of Bethel’s formation. Dr. Shi Meiyu and Jennie Hughes had organized Bethel in 1921 after they resigned, with some bitterness, from the Methodist Episcopal Church over theological differences related to education, and the administration of the mission work.\textsuperscript{75} Not wanting denominational interference in their plans, the two women started their own church, school, and hospital. Over the following decade they added a Bible school, a nurses training college, and an orphanage. All of it was located in the commercial center of China, in Shanghai. But in 1931, when they dedicated the evangelistic team, Shi and Hughes definitively shifted the identity of their work. It would no longer be exclusively tied to the city. Bethel would become a traveling mission available to all. The ceremony named that transition by likening the mission’s ten-year anniversary to the ten-day period between Christ’s ascension and Pentecost. At the commissioning service it was as if the

\textsuperscript{75} Evelyn Nicholson, Susan Townley to Miss Hughes, May 14, 1920, biographical files, Jennie Hughes, UMC; Ellin J. Knowles to [no name], June 24, 1920, biographical files, Jennie Hughes, UMC; “A Statement from New York Branch,” n.d., biographical files, Jennie Hughes, UMC. Lurking beneath the criticism of the church’s handling of schools was a theological argument. Christian schools were supposed to register in China and adopt standardized curricula, but Jennie Hughes and Shi Meiyu felt that government regulations would prohibit the proclamation of the gospel. Compromise on the issue was to compromise the gospel. After they left the Methodist church, the two women steadfastly refused to register any of the educational institutions that they began in Shanghai. See: Lu Ming, “Boteli mingmingde youlai [The origin of Bethel’s Name],” \textit{Jiushizhounian ganen tekan} [90\textsuperscript{th} Anniversary Thanksgiving Publication] (Hong Kong: Bethel, 2011).
time was fulfilled. Prayer and preparation were over. The gift of the Holy Spirit would now be offered to all through revivals conducted by the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band.76

The exceptional publication of Sung’s arcane sermons just two months later appeared anti-climactic in light of the momentous changes Bethel had just undergone. Why elevate the sermons of one of the many preachers that traveled through the Bethel chapel to the same level as the commissioning of the Worldwide Band? Apparently the editors of Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness] sensed the incongruity and promised that special issues were indeed reserved for special occasions and that this phrase would not be overused.77 But something wonderful was happening again. After he preached at Bethel in April 1931, Sung had agreed to travel with the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band, so the second special issue in June was but an extension of the introduction of the team made in April. In May 1931, Sung had caught up with the Bethel Band as it toured through Jiangsu and Shandong provinces and, the publication announced, he would return with them to Shanghai in July, and be the featured speaker of the Bethel Summer Conference.78 What had happened in May or June that changed Sung’s preaching? He had been inducted into the throbbing center of holiness revivalism in China.

Sung took to Bethel’s revivalism immediately. And as he had repeatedly demonstrated in the United States, he was a quick study. The assumptions, language, and techniques employed in modern revivals were already evident by the time his next sermon surfaced in print (July 1931). Sung never completely abandoned his infatuation with biblical mysteries—throughout his entire career he uncovered any number of them in each text—but their purpose was now to mobilize a person to repent and experience rebirth or renewal rather than experience awe. The shift in intent was so profound that only two months after traveling with the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band, Sung was renouncing all his earlier efforts at communicating the gospel. By his estimation, at least, his messages of mystery could not even hold a candle to the fire that Bethel’s revivalism kindled. He was a convert, and he determined to make his hearers believers too.

Once Sung adopted the revivalism of Bethel his rise through the organization was meteoric. In November 1931, Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness] announced that Sung had become a permanent member of the Worldwide Evangelistic Band. He was listed second, just after the Rev. Ji Zhiwen, who was a longtime member of the Bethel Mission, close associate of Jennie Hughes and Dr. Shi Meiyu, and the appointed leader of the group. Sung’s presence, however, shifted the dynamics of the small group. He was the

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79 Part of the reason Sung could so quickly adopt the sermonic tenor and format of revivalism was his own early exposure to it. As a child, Sung had witnessed a modern revival in his own hometown. It had an especially powerful impact on his sister. See: Song Shangjie, Wode jianzheng [My Testimony] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1991).

oldest of the team, having turned 30 by that time, and he had several years of ministerial experience.\textsuperscript{81} For a member of the team like Li Darong, who was not yet twenty, it was important to protect and honor Sung, feeling it was better to “spoil a young preacher rather than an important old one.”\textsuperscript{82} Sung’s influence within the team, over audiences, and at Bethel continued to grow rapidly. Within a short time, his name was listed first in reports about the Band in the Christian press.\textsuperscript{83} Ultimately, he also became preeminent within Bethel itself. In January 1932, only two months after officially joining the team, he was named editor-in-chief of \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan} [\textit{Guide to Holiness}], and by the end of that year Bethel, which had always faithfully referred to its trusted associate Ji Zhiwen as the captain of the team, capitulated to the new reality and named Sung as the first evangelist on staff.\textsuperscript{84}

Jennie Hughes gushed about Sung. She even rushed to the printer in December of 1932 to get one more story into her annual \textit{Heart Throbs} publication. It appeared that through Sung’s work, “The great World Revival that you and we are praying for these days may be on its way by way of Peiping [Beijing].”\textsuperscript{85} If there had ever been any doubt about Sung as a gifted preacher, it was now fully erased. To Hughes’s well-attuned ear, his sermons perfectly fit revivalism’s bill.

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\item[\textsuperscript{81}] Jennie Hughes, \textit{Bethel Heart Throbs of Revival 1931} (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1931).
\item[\textsuperscript{82}] Ibid., 21.
\item[\textsuperscript{83}] “Wuzhou kongqiande fenxing budao dahui,” \textit{Zhenguang} [\textit{True Light}], 31, no 7 (July 1932): 85.
\item[\textsuperscript{84}] Jennie Hughes, \textit{Bethel Heart Throbs—Surprises, 1932} (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1932).
\item[\textsuperscript{85}] Ibid., 67.
\end{itemize}
Sung’s services had become the signature expression of Bethel’s revivalism. After he joined the mission his career changed. Not only did he gain access to pulpits beyond Hinghwa. Through Bethel, Sung mastered a particular type of religious expression. He now belonged to an international network of holiness revivalism. But what did his revival services actually look like? And how did Sung’s revival sermons sound in China?

A Glocal Revivalist

In his efforts to delineate revivalism from other social and religious phenomena, Russell Richey has suggested ten ingredients should be present: “an underlying pietism, a missional theology, a soteriology of crisis, a jeremiadic understanding of ‘these days,’ crowds, voluntarism, dramatic ritual form, charismatic leadership, confidence in the Spirit’s presence, and a communication network.”86 He made the modest suggestion that his markers would work best in identifying revivals in “modern, Western Protestantism.”87 Others have expanded his view. Mark Noll, for instance, has argued that religious phenomena which have first occurred in the West will also appear in other parts of the world as they undergo similar historical changes. Revivalism, therefore, cannot be limited to one part of the globe.88 In their edited volume on Modern Christian Revivals, Edith Blumhofer and Randall Balmer found Richey’s proposed recipe the most helpful way of digesting various forms of revivalism that have cropped up not only in Europe

86 Richey, 172.
87 Ibid.
and the United States, but also in Latin America and China.\footnote{89} Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood, likewise, have argued that the East African Revival shared these common traits.\footnote{90} Richey may have been reluctant to over generalize, but after studying revivals around the world for almost fifty years Anthony F. C. Wallace concluded it was safe to say they were a “pancultural phenomenon,” which belonged to a class of “cultural-system innovation [that is] characterized by a uniform process.”\footnote{91} What Richey described in England and the United States, Noll, Blumhofer, Balmer, Ward, Wild-Wood, and Wallace all concluded could be applied elsewhere. In other words, revivalism is a transcultural experience, and Sung’s services should be analyzed as such.\footnote{92}

Global revivalism always occurs in local contexts.\footnote{93} They can be described as part of a larger, global movement without portraying them as a slavish reproduction of Western Christianity. Similarly, they can be studied as an expression of Chinese religious

\footnote{89} Edith L. Blumhofer and Randall Balmer, Modern Christian Revivals (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), xi.

\footnote{90} Kevin Ward and Emma Wild-Wood, The East African Revival: History and Legacies (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 4. Although Ward and Wood did not use Richey’s ten ingredients, the characteristics they identified as comprising the East African Revival were consonant with them. The difference in nomenclature should not cause one to overlook the fact that Ward and Wood concluded, “The East African Revival bears the hallmarks of American evangelical revivalism…and Keswick holiness.” Revivalism was not a strictly Euro-American phenomenon.


\footnote{92} Mark Shaw, Global Awakening: How 20th-Century Revivals Triggered a Christian Revolution (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), has written a whole book based on the idea that revivalism is a transcultural phenomenon.

\footnote{93} Peter Tze Ming Ng, Chinese Christianity: An Interplay between Global and Local Perspectives (Leiden: Brill, 2012).
devotion, without reducing them to a nativist movement. Revivals exist in a global-local matrix. They become an important place where global forces and local interests intersect.

What did that combination look and sound like in the revivals of John Sung? The rest of the chapter will explore what Sung’s services became after he adopted holiness revivalism. It must be confessed, however, that his revivals are more than the sum of their parts. Therefore, the following material will not be broken into ten subsections, each aligned with one of the ten ingredients of revivalism. Neither will it be organized around all the features particular to Sung’s local context. Instead, I will describe four features of Sung’s preaching ministry: his revival as a performance; the way he used his rhetoric to establish his authority to preach; the revival materials he used to construct his thousands of messages; and the way he saw his services as having eschatological significance. In each subsection, comments will direct the reader to the global-local matrix out of which Sung’s revivalism operated, but the aim will not be to dissect his revivals into their constituent global or local parts. The purpose will be to create an impression of the power of Sung’s revivalistic amalgamation.

Revival as a Performance

The plethora of sermons scattered throughout numerous periodicals or collected in various books fail to capture an essential aspect of Sung’s preaching ministry. After he

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95 They do, however, serve to remind readers that one of the ten ingredients in modern revivalism is a communication network. See: Richey, 171.
joined Bethel his preaching was foremost a performance. His messages were meant to be heard and watched, not read. Thus, Sung rarely—if ever—spent time correcting the proofs of his sermons that others wrote down. The text was always secondary. His preaching, as Richey described all modern revivals, was an event for a crowd: an audio, visual, and tactile experience of God’s message to those assembled.

Sung moved about a platform restlessly, waving his arms, stamping his foot, and shouting. He could leap off the platform once, twice, thrice, continuing on and on until he pulled himself back up by the pulpit for the seventh time having fully illustrated what Naaman went through to be healed. And like Naaman, Sung would be soaked through and through—not from the healing waters of the Jordan River, but from the profusion of sweat induced by his frenetic style.

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97 Song Shangjie, Jiangjingji [Bible Study] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1987), 1.

98 Richey, 169.

99 Leslie Lyall, John Sung, 131.

100 References to Sung’s energetic delivery and concomitant sweating are abundant. It was so characteristic of his delivery that, according to William E. Schubert, in I Remember John Sung, he would have to peel himself out of his sweat drenched clothes after each sermon, sometimes changing three times in one day.
Dressed in a low-class Chinese gown, Sung might theatrically produce any number of entertainments from his pockets. A pen could be used to draw what he was talking about. He could, for instance, quickly sketch a hypocrite on poster-size paper that accompanied him. By drawing a person with bulging eyes, large nose, flapping ears, big mouth, and round belly, yet with tiny arms and legs, Sung gave his audiences a memorable caricature of those who only see what is wrong with others, listen to flattery, speak critically, and gorge themselves on the mistakes of others, but who cannot actually do anything because of their shrunken limbs. He would end with an invitation for the spiritually maimed in the audience to come forward, repent of their sins, and be healed.

As a person did so, or even when he or she obstinately refused, the wall that separated a spectator from a participant would collapse. Each person was suddenly aware that he or she was part of the unfolding liturgical drama of salvation, as Richey called it, and forced to play a role with eternal consequences. But the audience members had already been part of the performance in a variety of ways, even before the sermon made people consciously decide whether to move to the front and confess their sins or to stay in

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101 Sung’s attire frequently drew comments. From the time he returned from the USA, he noted in his journal the surprise people had when they found him wearing Chinese style clothes, and not a Western suit or Chinese clothes associated with the educated class. Sung came to refer to his clothing as an appropriate status marker for his work: it symbolized his sacrificial ministry. When a wave of Chinese nationalism reinvigorated the market for traditional clothing in the 1930s, Sung’s well-known preference for it made him appear to be a stalwart supporter of the Chinese nation. See: Song Shangjie, November 8, 1927, SSD, TTC; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 2, translated by Timothy Tow (Singapore: Alice Doo, 1983), 46; Pearl Buck, “Introduction,” in My Country and My People by Lin Yutang (New York: John Day, 1939).

102 Song Shangjie, Fenxingji [Revival Messages] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1989), 38ff.

103 Richey, 170.
their seats and risk eternal condemnation. Sung was famous for getting people to sing the choruses he taught them. Even in the middle of his messages, he would frequently pause and give the congregation a chance to belt out a few simple lines as a way to reanimate the crowd. Other times someone in the audience would leap to his feet and heckle the preacher, thereby temporarily sharing his stage. Another person would seize the spotlight by making an exuberant display of God’s presence through speaking in tongues or falling into a trance. The interpreter also became an important actor, especially providing a memorable moment if during the revival performance Sung would brusquely send him or her off the stage for inadequately following his lead. Testimonies about what God was doing could sprout up anywhere, from anyone. A crippled woman might walk; a dumb child might suddenly speak. Sung’s revivals provided multiple stages for a variety of performers.

Yet in the circus-like atmosphere, Sung managed the action from the center-ring. And as the service built to its climactic finish, the moment of conversion, he was the one

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105 On the use of music in Sung’s services, see: William E. Schubert, I Remember John Sung, as well as a sermon like Song Shangjie, “Yongyuan shifang [Eternally Set Free],” Budao zazhi [Evangelism] 7:3 (1934): 13-14 which helpfully notes when the congregation broke the sermon with bouts of singing. John E. Su, Shenren Song Shangjie [Dr. John Sung—the Godly Man] (Hong Kong: Heavenly People Depot, 1959), 16-17 describes the impression made by Sung’s dismissal of an interpreter. For a fuller treatment of how testimonies could be managed in the service, see: J.P. Leynse to Friends, Christmas 1932, China Records Project RG 8, Box 115, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, Connecticut (henceforth abbreviated as YDSL). Healings, as they will be dealt with in chapter five, were a major draw and perhaps the most dramatic performance during Sung’s revivals. The examples listed above are found in: H.A. Wiese, “Blind Receives Sight, Dumb Speaks,” The Other Sheep (May 1936): 21-22, and Song Shangjie, Peilingji [Devotional Messages] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, n.d), 2.
who prompted people to play the leading roles. Before it was possible to attain new life, seekers had to nullify the old one. Sung told the members of the audience, therefore, to separate themselves symbolically from their old sinful lives by leaving their seats, and walk to the front of the sanctuary. “At that point the familiar social categories were… erased as social distinctions were dissolved.” Penitents, for example, would gather on the platform with Sung, or he would meet them at the altar, closing the distance between clergy and laity. More shocking still: men, women, and children would mix freely as equals beneath the cross. In the presence of one another, they articulated their failures clearly and out loud, neither boisterously shouting nor timidly mouthing them. Repentance was done in deep sorrow and with tears. For, as Sung directed the actors in this salvation drama, crying was a kind of baptism—tears helped cleanse the soul.

Besides his own stage cues, Sung also controlled the seemingly chaotic event through printed scripts. As in all modern revivals, Sung relied on media accounts to promote his services as a special work of the Holy Spirit. The coverage he received

106 Dickson D. Bruce, And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 87.


108 Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 2, 51ff. Recent literature has suggested that tears in confession and repentance have been especially powerful in remaking masculine identities. Men trying to leave gangs are encouraged to cry. Tears are a graphic break with the hypermasculinity associated with their violent pasts. See: Edward Orozco Flores and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, “Chicano Gang Members in Recovery: The Public Talk of Negotiating Chicano Masculinities,” Social Problems 60, no. 4 (2013): 476-490. Perhaps something similar was happening among Chinese men, as they confessed and renounced gender related sins, such as being members of a gang, visiting brothels, or getting into fights. The details of the sins confessed during Sung’s revivals will be explored in more detail in chapter 3.

109 Richey, 171.
endlessly rehearsed for readers how they were to act. Sinners were to be converted through tears; the rumble of group confession should shake a building as people collectively sobbed. None of the social or emotional disturbances were to be feared, readers were assured. Such behaviors were but an indication that the mighty wind of Pentecost was again shaking the church’s foundations.\textsuperscript{110}

That kind of publicity made Sung’s revivals sound exciting, and people flocked to them. When services would be temporarily suspended for an afternoon, or even until the next morning, some dared not leave the building lest they forsake their seat.\textsuperscript{111} For many, the revival was too compelling an event. It offered mysterious, fascinating, frightening, comic, and lurid displays. Public confessions, in particular, were packed with possibility. Anything might be said: they could be titillating, divisive, or disgusting.

As the revival wore on, confessions of latter converts tended to become more grandiose than those of the first. A kind of competition could lead to the inflation of sinfulness. In some places, the one-upmanship inspired early converts to have something like a second or third conversion in a later service, or in one case, even an eighteenth!\textsuperscript{112} Apparently some participants found it impossible to resist playing a part in the performance.


\textsuperscript{112} Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol. 2, 30-31, 52.
The extant sermon texts, however, have captured little of that theatrical reality. It is the memories of those who joined in, or even who watched askance as the production unfolded, that testify to the power of the experience. Sung’s revival sermons were more an event than an exposition. That is why it is not sufficient to scour through Sung’s transcribed sermons and analyze his theology. To do that alone is to drain his power as a preacher. Sung’s revivals were first and foremost a dramatic event. That was why he could report that when he was in Singapore, Indians—who could not understand a word of his preaching—were miraculously converted and physically healed.\textsuperscript{113} Faith comes by hearing, the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:17. But in Sung’s powerful performances, \textit{seeing} the revival meeting was sufficient unto salvation.

**Authority to Preach**

Once Sung embraced the cosmic drama of revivalism, he faced a challenge peculiar to revivalists. Traditional ministerial credentials were insufficient grounds of authority. Pastors and missionaries might hold impressive religious titles, such as Reverend or Doctor, but according to the logic of revivals such designations could never reveal the heart. Beneath the title could lurk a spirit numbed by worldliness or, worse still, a soul dead in its transgressions and sins.\textsuperscript{114} No bureaucratic authority could legitimate a person’s capacity to lead a revival. Thus, even though the Hinghwa Conference assigned him to the extraordinary post of China’s National Evangelist, Sung

\textsuperscript{113} Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol. 2, 68.

\textsuperscript{114} Richey, 166-167. Pietism’s emphasis on experimental religion, a feature in all modern revivals, undergirded Sung’s problem with human credentials.
never once pointed to his ordination by the Methodist Episcopal Church in defense of his ministry. His authority had to be derived elsewhere. Sung achieved this goal in his preaching.

As Richey has observed, all revivalists have to establish their charisma, to convince their audiences that they have been endowed with a divine gift. Therefore, Sung often began his sermons by announcing their heavenly origin. “The Holy Spirit told me what to preach,” was a suitable beginning. He might also add that the content was reliable because it came directly from God in a vision. “Once while I was at the mental hospital God showed me the City [New Jerusalem] as recorded in the Bible. There is not a speck of dirt there. It is all holy and pure.” Sung’s authority was rooted, first of all, in his access to God; he received direct messages from heaven.

If anyone questioned such a claim, he or she just needed to wait. “[At] the beginning of the last days, before Jesus comes back a second time, there must be a second John—an Elijah—who will come to earth, and hold the last great revival, giving the

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115 Xinghua bao 31, no. 50 (December 26, 1934): 27. Sung not only avoided talking about his ordination, but he even avoided the ceremony as well. For years, his home Conference asked Sung to attend its annual meetings to no avail. For a few years, the Conference sent him messages through his father, and then later the bishop, instructing him to finish his theological education. Sung never complied. Ultimately, in light of his successful ministry, the Conference decided to use a technicality in the Book of Discipline to excuse Sung from finishing the course of study. They were ready to ordain him. Even so, Sung did not come to the service, which forced the Conference to ask the Conference and bishop in Shanghai to perform an extraordinary ordination in their stead.


117 Song Shangjie, “Hagaishu [Haggai,,” Light in Darkness 6, no. 8 (June 1935): 41.


119 Song Shangjie, April 29, 1933, SSD, TTC.
people of the earth a final chance [to repent].” Sung was convinced that if a doubter stayed long enough to see the number of people who would swarm the front of the church to confess their sins, then he or she would know that the last great revival was among them, and Sung was the “second John” promised by God. He was the authorized agent of God’s Good News.

But even before that concluding demonstration at the altar, Sung found ways to substantiate his claims of possessing a divine gift. In his sermons, for instance, he used evidence from revival services he had conducted elsewhere. It was not happenstance that Sung’s illustrations, which filled his sermons, came exclusively from his own ministerial experience. As he piled on stories in which he had personally mediated exorcisms, physical healings, and conversions in other places, he was explaining the availability of God’s power to transform the lives of those who believed, while simultaneously affirming his own authority. To believe one was to accept the other.

Yet even as Sung was waving his divine credentials before an audience, he also worked to solidify his authority through more mundane channels. He was always willing to exploit his remarkable education in a country enamored with learning and the

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121 Virtually any sermon would give several illustrations of this point. Some that seemed to especially accent Sung’s mediating role of the miracle—even to the point of supplanting the miracle itself—can be found in: Song Shangjie, “Zhiyao yangwang yesu [Just Look to Jesus],” *Evangelism* 7:1 (1934): 8-11; Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 2, 39 and 75; Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji [Revival Messages]*, 191.
possibilities of modern science.\footnote{122} His Chinese audiences were subtly but surely reminded of Sung’s intellectual pedigree. When preaching he could ask rhetorically, “Do I not have a Ph.D.?” or mention that his wife was asking, “Am I not a doctor’s wife?”\footnote{123} He also used the story of how he threw his academic degrees and awards into the ocean to accomplish two seemingly contradictory things. On the one hand, he communicated that such glories were vain and empty, especially compared to his divine calling. On the other hand, for all their supposed uselessness, Sung’s story purposefully reminded everyone that he had earned the highest academic honors.

The emphasis he placed on his academic credentials and was not an end in itself. Sung wanted to establish that he had that kind of earthly authority, so he could supersede it. He often went to great lengths to show just how wide his worldly knowledge ranged. In one sermon he told his audience that he had studied astronomy, geology, zoology, and biology. He had done research in chemistry. He had plumbed history, politics, economics, and “every kind of science.”\footnote{124} He knew all of it. So when he said such knowledge and expertise could not save China, he was saying it as one who had actual authority on the

\footnote{122 D.W.Y. Kwok, \textit{Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900–1950} (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1965).}

\footnote{123 See, for example: Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol 1.}

\footnote{124 Song Shangjie, \textit{Fenxingji [Revival Messages]}, 8.
subject. He knew from experience what it was like to gain glory, money, and blessing for his family and nation, and he also knew that it was in vain.

The important difference between Sung and others was that he had all the necessary experience. And experience, as Richey has argued, is a non-negotiable feature of revivalism. Others could talk about science, they could promote the social gospel, but did they have any authority or experience in the matter? Not when compared to Sung! *Bethel Heart Throbs of Revival* illustrated the difference. One missionary, “who did not believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ nor in the Old Testament,” approached Sung before a revival meeting. He was unaware that Sung held a Ph.D. in chemistry, and asked him what he thought of science. Taken aback by Sung’s quick dismissal of science’s ability to modernize, strengthen, or rescue China, the missionary switched tracks, “Mr. Fosdick and Mr. Gandhi are types of the real Christian.” At which point Sung retorted:

China does not need the teaching of Fosdick, nor Gandhi. The teaching of Confucius is far better than either. What the Chinese need is Jesus Christ and His Cross. So many talk about Fosdick. Do you know him? Have you heard him teach or preach? I have studied under him, but I cast him and his teachings out of my heart and my life forever. Then they said that I was mentally wrong and sent me to a hospital for one hundred and ninety-three days to rest! It was there that God’s Word became precious to my soul!

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126 Ibid.

127 Richey, 167.

The report ended with the two men walking into the service together, where Sung promptly led one hundred people to faith in Jesus Christ. Sung was obviously portrayed as the real authority in the story. Only he had experiential knowledge of science, Harry Fosdick, evangelism, and biblical truth. The missionary, for all his credentials, appeared the fool.

Personal experience trumped all bureaucratized form of authority. Sung relished comparing the sterile sermons of trained clergy to a twelve-year-old in Nanjing who stood up during his revival and testified in a manner that surpassed all the ministers’ sermons. Who really had God’s power and authority? What about the four-year-old who preached after God inspired her? Did she need to go to seminary? Look at the young people in Southeast Asia, who knew nothing more than “dances, love-making, and money-making” before they met God, but who were now speaking about the rapture because God gave them supernatural visions. Were they to remain silent? An experience of God was all that truly mattered, Sung insisted, and he assured audiences in numerous ways that he more than met that bare requirement to preach.

A personal experience of God was what opened the Bible to Sung, and supplied him with his messages. “Before I was personally born again, I was able to understand all kinds of the world’s learning, but I could not understand [cantou] the wonder of the cross.

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129 This method of establishing Sung’s authority was not limited to missionary observers like Jennie Hughes. Sung, himself, used stories that accentuated his personal knowledge of a subject to establish his expertise, and lay claim to authority. See, Song Shangjie, Fenxingji [Revival Messages], 47.

130 Song Shangjie, “Shituxingzhuan diyizhang [Acts Chapter One],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 30; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol 1., 50; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Servmons, vol. 2, 70.
Only after I was born again, was I able to understand more of the wonder of the cross as I read more of the Bible.”

That ability to understand the Bible was critical, because Sung held it up as the supreme authority during his revival services, surpassing his own. He insisted that the scriptures were all that people needed; they did not need meetings, church committees, or worldly knowledge to direct their lives. The Bible was more than sufficient. Even God relied on it! In elaborating John’s vision in Revelation chapter five, Sung described the heavenly scene. When the Lamb of God stood in heaven and took the scroll that would wind up history, Sung asked, “What book is in God’s hand? Is it a novel? Astronomy? History? Geography? Physics? Chemistry? Philosophy? No! No! This book is the book of Revelation. It is the precious Bible.” Nothing else could compare. Nothing else really mattered. The Bible was the essential document of Sung’s revivals, and its curtailment was the antithesis to spiritual renewal.

His attitude toward the Bible helps explain Sung’s antipathy toward Roman Catholicism and theological modernism. Sung excoriated the Roman Catholic Church for restricting lay people from having access to the full Word of God. For him, Luther was a hero not because of any doctrinal insights he may have had, but because he made the

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131 Song Shangjie, Lingcheng zhinan [A Guide for the Spiritual Journey], 2. Sung’s word choice is interesting. He used a word for “understanding” associated with the religious language of Buddhism. Such an understanding described coming to a realization through meditation. In Sung’s vocabulary it probably suggests that enlightenment occurs through spiritual transformation.


133 Song Shangjie, Fenxingji [Revival Sermons], 176.
Bible accessible to everyone. Sung’s attacks on modernism should be understood in that same vein. His primary concern was that modernist scholars limited access to the whole Bible by raising questions about the reliability of Genesis and Revelation, in particular. They were infringing on the controlling document of the revivals, at least in theory.

In reality, of course, the more troubling issue was that both Roman Catholics and theological modernists threatened the real authority behind Sung’s revivals, which was not ultimately *sola scriptura*, but experience. Roman Catholics and modernists proposed alternative modes for understanding the Bible. Their reliance on tradition and reason threatened Sung’s claims of having divine authority based solely on his personal experience. He therefore attacked their positions, accusing them of depending on human wisdom rather than on the Word of God. He wanted to extricate himself from reliance on anything but the Bible alone. In practice, of course, he only elevated his own experience. As Jerald Brauer has observed, “Though Scripture alone is the source of authority for revivalism, only the truly converted are in a position to interpret Scripture properly; therefore, in a very profound sense, authority itself is grounded in the conversion experience.” Sung, like the other preachers in the global revivalist network, derived his

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134 Song Shangjie, *Peilingji [Devotional Messages]*, 40.

135 Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi jiejing [Dr. Song Shangjie’s Explanation of Scripture],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* 3, no. 4 (May 1931): 6.

right to speak about the Bible from his religious experience. No wonder the story of his conversion experience evolved and featured so prominently throughout his entire ministry.\textsuperscript{137} It was the foundation of his authority to speak; he used it to convince people to listen to what he said.

Stock Material

Sung preached extemporaneously. “I used to preach from notes,” he explained, but “what I spoke about I had never experienced.”\textsuperscript{138} As he grew in the confidence of his own experience and its concomitant authority, he started to ask his audience, “What chapter in the Bible do you want me to preach from?”\textsuperscript{139} In an incredible display of mental agility he would manage to concoct a sermon on the spot. The instantly constructed sermon emerged out of Sung’s genius, but also out of what Richey called revivalism’s theology of crisis and its emphasis on voluntarism.\textsuperscript{140} Sung knew that before he concluded preaching, he always needed to bring people to a fork in the spiritual road, and to help them choose salvation. In order to achieve those twin goals, Sung relied on a number of stock elements to build his sermons: allegorizing the Chinese language, using the body as metaphor, retelling stories of his own experiences as illustrations, structuring

\textsuperscript{137} See Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{138} Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol. 1, 45.


\textsuperscript{140} Richey, 170.
his sermons in a set pattern around the theme of salvation, and moving towards an emotional decision-making moment.

*Hidden Meaning in the Chinese Characters*

The Chinese biblical text was packed with potential and could set off a series of vignettes. Sung, for example, was a master in a long tradition of seeing the gospel hidden in the Chinese characters themselves. When he came across a word like faith [信], it was natural for him to elaborate how the character was made up of two parts. The first was the sign for a person; the second signified a word. Faith, therefore, was already perfectly described in the Chinese language: a person needed to rely on God’s Word. Were his listeners ready to do that?

The character 十, which means ten, opened the possibility for Sung to introduce set elements about the necessity of salvation through the cross of Christ. 十 is the first character in the word for the cross [十字架], and therefore whenever he came across a 10 in the Bible, Sung gave an impassioned presentation of the cross and its role in conversion. The text he was preaching from did not need to be related to the crucifixion.

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141 Nathan Faries, *The “Inscrutably Chinese” Church: How Narratives and Nationalism Continue to Divide Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 83. Faries seems to indicate that missionaries were particularly enamored with this technique, but Chinese Christians employed it too. See, for example, R. O. Hall’s description of one of T. Z. Koo’s talks during the 1930s. R. O. Hall, *T. Z. Koo: Chinese Christianity Speaks to the West* (London: SCM Press, 1950), 29.

142 Song Shangjie, *Peilingji* [Devotional Messages], 11.

The Ten Commandments or the ten sections of John 14 could both segue into an impassioned description of Jesus’ death on the cross, or literally translated, his death on the wood-planks-in-the-shape-of-the-number-ten, because the character ten [＋] provided the sufficient link between the material.¹⁴⁴

The transliteration of biblical names also helped Sung diagnose a person’s spiritual condition. Judas Iscariot [猶大, Youda] wanted to be big [大, da], and spent his life always trying to be bigger. He ended up a big/fat man who pursued fame and money. Most listeners, Sung concluded, were like Judas, and thus needed to be converted and be re-named 猶小 [Youxiao], 小 [xiao] being the character for small.¹⁴⁵

**Body metaphors**

The introduction of Judas’s body size was no accident or simply a joke. Sung’s sermons constantly drew and elaborated upon body imagery. It was another way he could introduce stock material. A person possessed by a demon, he tended to observe, was delivered to evil “from head to foot.”¹⁴⁶ He would then catalogue what that meant: the person’s thinking was not clear, his or her eyes were used to read novels or go to movies, the person’s mouth indulged in smoking, hands were employed to hit others, etc. The sins could change, but the body always remained a doorway through which Sung could enter

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¹⁴⁵ Song Shangjie. “Shituxingzhuan diyizhang [Acts Chapter One],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 32.

to call people to repent of various evils. In Jesus’ body, Sung reversed the message: “For the waywardness of our feet, Christ’s feet were crucified. For the evil and malicious thoughts of our mind, Christ had to wear the crown of thorns…We deserve to die by our covetous hearts, but Christ sorrowed in His heart for us even to be beaten and pierced in bitter suffering for all the sins of our bodies.” Sung even found ways to use non-bodily objects to make bodily points, because the metaphoric power of the body was so strong.

When he preached on Jesus feeding five thousand, he pointed out that the boy offered Jesus five loaves and two fish, a symbolic gesture. Human bodies have five fingers, five toes, and five organs, two hands, two feet, two eyes and two ears. Following the boy’s example, he invited his audience to offer their bodies to Christ, and turn from sin.

This penchant for seeing sermon material in the body resonated with popular Chinese culture. In the minds of most Chinese an analogy existed between the human body and the social/religious order. The language about the one could easily transfer to language about the other. That meant the mysteries of the spiritual world were embedded in the body. One Chinese religious sect, for example, oriented the human body to physical space (the five directions of the Chinese compass), to time (the ten heavenly

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147 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 57-58.

148 Song Shangjie. “Song Shangjie boshi yanjiangji [Text of Dr. Song Shangjie’s Sermon].” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* 3, no. 3 (March 1931): 4.

stems that shape the Chinese calendar), and to natural processes (the five Chinese elements):

The ear corresponds to the east, to *chia* and *I*, and to wood.
The eye corresponds to the south, to *ping* and *ting*, and to fire.
The nose corresponds to the west, to *keng* and *hsin*, and to metal.
The mouth corresponds to the north, to *jen* and *kuei*, and to water…

Such a chant was obviously not Sung’s material, but it was not that far from it either. For those familiar with the one, it would have not appeared surprising to hear the other:

“What are we doing with our two hands and ten fingers? To take hold of the cross! Two feet and ten toes? To go the way of the cross! Our eyes are horizontally placed, our nose points vertically. That forms the cross, that we should preach the cross [with our mouth].” Bodies continuously provided Sung an opportunity to call people to repent and choose to walk in the way of Christ.

*Illustrations*

The most recurrent features of Sung’s sermons were his illustrations. He could tell any number of stories to drive home his point. They were overwhelmingly didactic in nature, presenting positive and negative models of behavior, and they emphasized the normativity of conversion. If he wanted to show that no one was beyond salvation, he might tell the story of the man who committed murder, but found forgiveness in the

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151 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 2, 47.
message of the cross. If he needed to remind people of the danger of not being saved, he tended to tell his audience about a female student who committed suicide simply because she could not bring herself to return a ring she had stolen. Most of the illustrations he repeated were based on people he had met, a few were fictitious, but almost all the stories served his larger purpose of emphasizing the necessity of being born again.

The frequency with which he pulled out these stories made them akin to well-worn stones. They appeared almost by force of habit. So much so, Sung sometimes fell into telling the same audience the same story day after day. In some cases the illustration would be repeated word-for-word in each telling. Other times, they could undergo significant transformation. Sung, for instance, enjoyed telling the story of a woman he healed in Shandong. She had been ill for eighteen years. What ailed her, however, changed depending on the text of his sermon. When Sung preached about Jesus’ ability to cast out a legion of evil spirits in Mark 5, the woman he healed was diagnosed as insane; when he preached about Peter healing a lame man before the gate of the temple

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154 See, for example, the sermons Sung preached in Changsha in November 1933. The same story about people praying for inappropriate things appears multiple times. The sermons appear successively in the issues of *Budao zazhi [Evangelism]* published in 1934.
in Acts 3, she was paralyzed.\textsuperscript{155} The affliction did not matter as much as her instantaneous cure. God’s saving work, whether in the body or in the heart, offered those with ears to hear, the opportunity to begin a new life.

\textit{Set structure}

When Sung preached, he always selected a whole chapter. A chapter, he believed, completed a divine thought. As he moved through a chapter, his verse-by-verse explication still provided him opportunity to identify and play with any number of mysteries, as he had done in the past, but now they became subservient to a larger story. In Mark 5, for example, he observed that the narrative had parallels with the Old Testament. The demon-possessed man, who appeared at the beginning of the chapter, was living in a graveyard where people would try to bind him with chains. This, Sung concluded, represented [daibiao] the Israelites living in Egypt where they were bound by Pharaoh to be his slaves. The subsequent story about the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years became a type of the twelve tribes of Israel wandering in the desert. Similarly, the twelve-year-old girl who was healed at the end of the chapter mirrored how the twelve tribes entered the Promised Land. The resemblance between the texts excited Sung: “Everyone! When you look at what we have read in Mark 5, we must feel that Jesus’ life and his words and actions are incredibly amazing. He used three stories to

\textsuperscript{155} Song Shangjie, \textit{Peilingji [Devotional Messages]}, 2; Song Shangjie, “Yongyuan shifang [Eternally Set Free],” \textit{Budao zazhi [Evangelism]} 7:3 (1934): 14. The same story is repeated in other places as well. See: Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol. 1, 30 and 153. The missionaries in Shandong, who carefully investigated the case, reported that the woman was paralyzed before her healing. See, Mary K. Crawford, \textit{The Shantung Revival} (Shanghai: China Baptist Publication Society, 1933).
draw out the meaning of events in the Old Testament.” More important than the mystery, however, was the three-part division. Sung could now preach the standard revival storyline: Mark 5 represented the need for people to be born again, be sanctified, and have spiritual victory. His ordo salutis controlled his interpretation. That was the single most significant development in his maturation as a preacher. Sung moved from being strictly enamored with the mysteries he discovered in various verses, to controlling their meaning by inducting them into a fixed order of salvation, which he saw operating in every chapter. From that point on, virtually every sermon had the same basic skeletal structure; he told the same general story.

In order to lift revivalism’s story of salvation out of the chapters from which he preached, Sung often resorted to allegorical readings of the Word of God. If a passage did not immediately seem to suggest it was speaking about the new birth or sanctification, then Sung could help his audience look beneath the surface. He often did this in ways familiar in the history of biblical interpretation. His explanation of the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance, was not that far from, say, St. Augustine’s. The man in the story was robbed and beaten on his way from Jerusalem down to Jericho. Sung echoed the church father when he told his audience that Jerusalem represented the Heavenly City, and going down to Jericho indicated a move away from that blessed state.

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157 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 124.
He went on to elaborate the meaning of each character and substance in the parable, like most preachers through Christian history. The differences that existed between his interpretation and those of the early Church Fathers derived from Sung’s revivalistic accent. This parable was not merely shorthand for the redemption story. It was each listener’s life story, and every person was presently taking part in it. Sung was incessantly asking his listeners, in one way or another, with whom they identified. Were they the hypocritical Levite? Were they the half-dead man, desperately in need of revival? Did they have the two coins that the Samaritan gave to the innkeeper? They had better, because Christ/the Samaritan gave both the Old Testament and New Testament to use for their spiritual healing while they awaited his return. Sung’s allegory plotted everyone somewhere along the line of salvation.

He could produce similar effects from any text he expounded. When he asked the audience to turn in their Bibles to Matthew 5, he revealed the order of salvation embedded in the beatitudes. Each beatitude was an allegory of one stage in the systematic process of salvation: (1) the poor in spirit represented repentance; (2) those who mourn referred to those who were reborn; (3) the meek symbolized those submitted to God’s control; (4) those who hunger and thirst for righteousness stood for the desire to read God’s Word; (5) the merciful were figures of those who joined evangelistic teams out of compassion for sinners; and the like. Everyone, Sung presumed, could be mapped as

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159 Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 2, 44-47.
somewhere along in that process. Therefore, whether he relied on allegory or not, once he adopted revivalism, Sung crafted all his sermons to emphasize the need to undergo some kind of spiritual regeneration, and thereby move farther along in the process of salvation.

Moving to decision

The way Sung imagined his *ordo salutis* functioning in people’s lives meant he placed an inordinate amount of stress on individual decision, or what Richey called voluntarism.¹⁶⁰ Each step through the order of salvation required a choice. People needed to decide their religious identity. A person could not rely on his or her family or clan.¹⁶¹ Sung cautioned each listener not to act like Lot, who assumed that being connected to Abraham was sufficient for salvation. You cannot borrow your spiritual identity, he warned them.¹⁶² The voluntarism of revivalism demanded each person to make his or her own decision. If that meant reimagining biblical texts to drive home the point, Sung would do that. The parable of the lost sheep, for instance, no longer turned on the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine in search of the one who wandered off (Luke 15:3-7). Instead, Sung told that parable so that the lost sheep, itself, decided to go home.¹⁶³ It was

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¹⁶²  Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji [Revival Messages]*, 165.

¹⁶³  Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji [Revival Messages]*, 5.
a point consistent with his theology, and with revivalism in general. “[R]evivalism underscores the call to decision,” Michael McClymond concluded in his evaluation of modern revivals, “and implies that eternal destinies hinge on momentary choices…. The reviverist milieu is pervaded by a consciousness—or rather hyperconsciousness—of an inevitable and momentous spiritual choice.”\(^\text{164}\)

Sung’s audience usually made such a decision after he awakened their desires. He would interject questions designed to tap into the dissatisfaction experienced by his listeners, paralleling techniques emerging in China’s new advertisement industry.\(^\text{165}\) He would question if they had sufficient or satisfactory power, often leaving the exact nature of the power unspecified. The idea seemed to be that if a listener could imagine any deficit in his or her life, then here was something on offer with the power to make it better. He would ask:

Are you downcast? Perhaps in our midst there are those who’ve lost their husbands, their children are unfilial, houses are burnt and destroyed…. You have sustained losses materially, spiritually…. You’re in deep sickness? Your family is breaking up? You’re being cheated and oppressed? You’re being reviled and accused? Quickly examine yourselves: Have you loved the world? Have you been ungrateful and rebelled against God? Is the Lord pruning you, refining you to make you


\(^\text{165}\) Sung’s methodology was quite similar to what began happening to visual culture in China in the 1930s. Yeh Wen-hsin remarked how in the 1920s and 1930s artists started to work strategically, so that “The sensual and alluring qualities of [their] images encouraged desire and possession.” Sung, working a different medium, clearly aimed at the same thing. See: Yeh Wen-hsin, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 68.
perfect? Don’t blame God for chastising you. Look to Him the more.
Draw nigh.  

Whatever dissatisfaction existed, Sung’s messages indicated people always had the power to change their circumstances. It was a matter of choice. No matter what issue overwhelmed the soul, or niggled at a person’s happiness, the ability to redress the situation was within grasp: the sinner needed to repent; the saved needed to consecrate themselves and be sanctified; the sanctified needed to evangelize. The revival invited each person to choose to take the next step in the order of salvation.

That decision was a matter of urgency. “Today is the day of acceptance. Do not wait any longer!” In fact, the danger of waiting was an essential aspect of the message. It enhanced the crisis, which revivalism focuses upon. If a person missed the opportunity to complete all the steps, they risked dire consequences. In retelling the story of the Passover, Sung provided his audience with an imaginary account of what happened in an Egyptian home. A young Egyptian boy, he informed the congregation, heard about the coming Passover from an Israelite child:

The Egyptian boy said, “I am the eldest, but we don’t have any blood!” So he left his friend, and returned home. He told his father, and pleaded with him to kill a lamb. His father answered: “Do not be troubled by them, Jews are the most superstitious people. Come and eat!” Poor little child, he could eat but not swallow. His mother took him to sleep, but the child did not dare. His mother said, “Do not worry! I will sleep with you.” A little after ten the child woke up: “Mama! Quick, kill a lamb!” His mother once

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166 Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 1, 151.


168 Richey, 168.
again patted him, and used comforting words until the boy once more fell asleep. All was quiet and still for an hour and a half, when suddenly the terrified boy once more woke up, yelling: “Mama! Hurry, kill a lamb!” His mother again comforted him, and his father said, “Son! Do not be afraid! If an angel really comes, your daddy will fight him off.” The boy once again relaxed… . Time flew by, and it was already 11:50. The child woke for a last time, and pleaded—as his whole body was drenched with sweat—saying, “Mama! Hurry, kill a lamb. The angel is coming soon!” The mother saw how anxious her son was, and told him a little lie: “I already killed it.” The child, who knew no better, fell back asleep, but soon thereafter his mother heard footsteps, and [saw] a flash of light like the sun, and she heard her precious child dying cry: “Mama!” That was his last sound. The mother hurriedly said, “Angel! Stop!” Unfortunately, it was too late! Dead!169

To delay was to risk eternal peril.

If the decision needed to be made now, so the ensuing change promised to be instantaneous. Sung preached that a spiritual transformation was a highly condensed experience. He expected renewal to happen “suddenly.”170 He told audiences that when Zacchaeus met Jesus, he was a totally different person within five minutes of the encounter.171 When he asked those attending his revival services to raise their hands or to come to the front of the sanctuary as an expression of their desire for a new life, he prepared them for an enormous internal reorganization. People, he explained, would

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170 Song Shangjie, “Saoluode mengen [Saul Receives Grace],” *Light in Darkness* 7, no. 11 (November 1936): 23. The word “suddenly” was Sung’s favorite adverb for describing spiritual transformation.

171 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 2.
come before the platform in tears over their current life, but leave with a new one.\textsuperscript{172} The work of God was that fast.

A Glocal Storyteller

Sung’s flexibility in creating, adapting, and changing his sermons should be understood in the context of traditional Chinese storytelling. Chinese storytellers also worked with stock material. Parts of their stories were set pieces learned by heart but, in their oral performances, storytellers had considerable freedom to choose their own words, incorporate digressions, and even make up episodes. “The performed story is always a new instance or version of the ‘skeleton of [a] narrative,’ and no two performances are the same.”\textsuperscript{173} Sung’s ability to quote, modify, or invent material followed the same pattern.

In her research on “The Storyteller’s Manner in Chinese Story Telling,” Vibeke Børdahl compiled a list of standard features of Chinese storytelling across China:

- Place: storytellers house (shuchang); teahouses, recreation centers, schools, hotels, most often a special platform serving as stage
- Number and gender of performers: one male storyteller (or, more rarely, one female storyteller)
- Dress: male: long traditional gown…
- Song and music: no singing or music, but intermittent recitation of poetry
- Requisites: table, tablecloth, chair, teacup, “talk-stopper” (zhiyu), handkerchief and fan
- Gestures and mime: an essential part of the art


• Voice production: extralinguistic voice production: such phenomena as speed, loudness, breathing, and voice quality…¹⁷⁴

When Børdahl made the caveat that in some places storytellers do intermittently interrupt their stories to sing, the picture of Sung as a traditional storyteller becomes quite compelling. He always delivered his sermons on stage; he was the sole performer; he was widely known to eschew popular Western dress in favor of a long traditional gown; he frequently interrupted his message to sing an appropriate song; he used props; his gestures, mime, and voice production were well known and generally appreciated. Even his sermon illustrations mimicked standard tropes in Chinese literature.¹⁷⁵

Whether or not Sung consciously cast himself in the storyteller’s mold, his identification was close enough that some perceived him as an entertainer.¹⁷⁶ That role certainly granted him license as he preached his sermons. He could use, reuse, and modify stock material during any sermon. The expectations that surrounded Chinese

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¹⁷⁵ In his essay, “The Social and Historical Context of Ming-Ch’ing Local Drama,” Tanaka Issei described stock stories in Chinese dramas. Common stories included tales of men leaving their homes to make their way in the world, and eventually sending letters back to their anxious families reporting their success. Sung clearly adopted that storyline in one of his favorite illustrations. See: *Fenxingji [Revival Messages]*, 174-175.

¹⁷⁶ As a curious bystander, and not a church member, Chen Rongzhan identified Sung as a “street performer.” He noted his gestures and voice production, in particular. He also talked about the audience being primarily elderly women, the same kind of audience—one must note—that Børdahl identified as commonly attending traditional storytelling performances. While the similarity may have given Chen a handle on how to interpret what he was witnessing, it also introduced certain biases. He clearly disdained Sung. A storyteller was not an automatic draw. Some believed traditional storytelling was symbolic of the world China was jettisoning as it modernized. Others probably recoiled at the low-class status of performers. For most it was a fusion of the two: Sung could appear to be part of the low-class that was generally blamed for China’s political and social stagnation. See: Chen Rongzhan, “Notes on Dr. Sung’s Preaching.” On the social status of traditional Chinese entertainers see: Tong Soon Lee, *Chinese Street Opera in Singapore* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
storytelling granted Sung considerable latitude in his preaching. He needed only to be sure that his allegorizing of Chinese characters, his metaphorical use of the body, and his standard illustrations did not overwhelm the core story. And they did not. For once Sung employed stock outlines, his sermons relentlessly drove to revivalism’s moment of crisis and the necessity for every listener to make a personal faith decision.

The End of the World

With a theology of crisis that centered on radical conversions, or definitive breaks, Sung drew hard lines between the church and world. The oppositions were only intensified by the lateness of the hour. The world was in catastrophic decline, so it was imperative for those who were saved to evangelize before Jesus Christ’s imminent return. That message of declension and the need for aggressive proselytism were the final ingredients in Richey’s recipe for revivalism, and they flavored Sung’s revivalism in distinctive ways.\(^\text{177}\)

Dualism

Sung’s explanation of reality was intensely dualistic. He divided the world between those who were saved and those not saved; he drew hard lines between the church and world. Everything could be split into twos: life versus death, light versus darkness.

\(^{177}\) Richey, 167-68; Decline and aggressive revivalism were fueled by Sung’s premillennial vision. He believed the world would get worse until Christ returned. However, Christ would only return after the gospel was preached to all the world. See: Song Shangjie, “Shituxingzhuan diyizhang [Acts Chapter One],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 30.
darkness, hot versus cold. Other polarities were less intuitive. Sung, for example, never spoke like a fire-and-brimstone preacher. Heaven did not stand opposed to hell, but in opposition to the earth. The world in which he existed, saturated with its political, economic, and military crises was hellish enough. The world was in irremediable decline: “This evening I have described the joys of [heaven] and the suffering of earth, so that you may know, and in hopes that everyone will go to our heavenly hometown.”

His depiction of a world that had fallen into chaos could lead to a denigration of this life and, more specifically, to an abhorrence of the body:

> Our bodies are counted as nothing! … When a person dies, the spirit leaves the body. The body is like old and ruined clothes, so we need to look past the body. One day when our work is done, God will throw away our torn and old clothes. Many people are blind. They treat their body like an idol and worship it. In fact, the body is not important; the soul, on the other hand, is important. We need to break free of the chains of the body.

Yet, he disrupted the thrust of that body-soul dualism with another. Sung, spoke far more often of the body in terms of either sickness or health. “No sin, no sickness; have sin, have sickness,” was a pithy refrain he used to describe a fundamental dualism in the world. He believed those who were sick could and should be made well by confessing

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179 Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji [Revival Messages]*, 187.

their sins and asking God for forgiveness. The aim in such cases was not the destruction of body, but its fundamental reordering.\textsuperscript{181}

Contradictory dualisms, as the ones above, tumbled out of Sung’s mouth left and right, demonstrating that he was not working them out systematically.\textsuperscript{182} The important thing to recognize is that Sung’s theological matrix generated an almost endless supply of binary opposites. Opposition, more than any precise content, was the goal. Sung expressed revivalism’s message of declension by dividing the world into opposing camps: this evil age as diametrically opposed to what God had originally intended and what God still planned to do.\textsuperscript{183}

Such a binary and polarized vision did not come strictly from Sung’s theology or revivalism; it also imitated the political language that surrounded him. Throughout his years working in China, politicians and activists were busily carving the world into polar opposites through their rhetoric. Intellectuals mobilized the New Culture movement of the 1910s and 1920s by juxtaposing their utopian vision of China’s future to a present they described as subservient, hierarchical, patriarchal, and decadent.\textsuperscript{184} A variety of “anti-” movements quickly flourished and then withered in the first third of the twentieth

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\item Song Shangjie, Fenxingji \textit{[Revival Messages]}, 72; Song Shangjie, “Xiang wo chui lingqi [May the Spirit Breathe on Me],” \textit{Budao zazhi \textit{[Evangelism]}} 8, no. 3 (May-June 1935): 10.
\item For further examples, see: Song Shangjie, \textit{Fenxingji \textit{[Revival Messages]}} 8; Song Shangjie, “Shituxingzhuan diyizhang [Acts Chapter One],” \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan \textit{[Guide to Holiness]}} 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 28-33.
\item Once more, Sung’s theology controlled the use of his scientific knowledge. He introduced the idea of positive and negative charges, for example, as a way of illustrating the dualisms of which he spoke. See: Song Shangjie, “Shituxingzhuan di’erzhang [Acts Chapter Two],” \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan \textit{[Guide to Holiness]}} 3, no. 11 (November 1931): 28-33.
\item Zarrow, 129.
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century. Their very titles, “Anti-Christian movement,” for example, categorized all people as belonging to either one of two groups. Others, like the Nationalists (KMT) and Communists (CCP) turned to a polarized vocabulary to glorify nationalism and demonize imperialism. The state, meanwhile, defined religion so that it, too, was understood by its opposite. Religion was contrary to superstition. Bit by bit, dichotomous thinking colonized virtually every aspect of life in China.

A Radicalized Constituency

Sung’s messages must be understood as part of the antagonistic dualism that permeated China in the 1930s. His sermons borrowed from such thinking, just as they fed it: “We are not afraid of the enemy without, but rather the enemy within,” he told a congregation, “Let us ‘purge our party’!” His combative words merged with the prevailing political discourse, and produced similar results.

Studies of the rhetoric of political polarization have observed two things. First, most people in a country are unmoved by it. Some remain oblivious to the heated exchanges; others ignore, resist, or take them for granted. Second, despite the general ineffectiveness of polarized language to mobilize the masses, it is capable of radicalizing

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a minority—almost always a segment of those already engaged in the political process. A close look at Sung’s ministry confirms the same dynamics at work.

Sung never motivated a large percentage of the population to change. His revivals were always a storm in a teacup. Even his very largest services included but a tiny proportion of the local population. In 1935, Sung held a month-long campaign in the treaty-port of Xiamen. During that time he led a revival and, simultaneously, a course on the Bible. Delegates from all across China swelled the audience to 6,000 people, making it the largest group he ever addressed. Yet at that high water mark, those in attendance barely represented three percent of the 177,000 people living in the city. Even among the Christians in a city, that tiny segment of the general population of China, Sung had limited impact. His revivals frequently passed by many Christians unnoticed or at least without remark. It is difficult to make a case from silence, but after reading extensively through correspondence written at the time of Sung’s revivals in numerous cities, as well as what was written in the months following, one cannot help but be struck by the absence of references to his services. The overwhelming majority of Christians whose records survive gave him absolutely no attention. The exception, by its Spartan account, reinforced the rule. Jeanie McClure, ABCFM missionary in Fuzhou, for example, wrote to her parents:

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We had a full day on Sunday. It began with 2-hour church. The first speaker was an army man who had just had a thrilling rescue from brigands, and told all about it. Then he was taken into the church and his three children baptized. His wife is already a member. Then we had communion, and then a member of the Bethel Band holding special meetings here for a couple of weeks talked till the 2 hours were up. He has a most dramatic way of preaching, much like the story-tellers on the street which the Chinese are so fond of listening to.\footnote{191}

Her daily diary said even less about the man and the event. She, along with the majority of Chinese, was simply not mobilized by Sung’s uncompromising dualisms.

He did succeed, however, in radicalizing a significant minority of people, though the exact numbers are elusive. During his life, and afterward, he, and friendly observers, estimated that his ministry converted 100,000 people or more.\footnote{192} The language of conversion, however, may be problematic if one conceptualizes it as moving from one faith tradition to another. The evidence indicates that the overwhelming majority of people who “converted” during Sung’s services were, in fact, “radicalized”; they already identified as Christians but strengthened their commitment to Christ during the revivals.

In Henan, Ernest Weller reported to the China Inland Mission, “[T]he year has

\footnote{191} Jeanie McClure to Folks, June 8, 1932 (China Records Project, RG 8, Box 122) YDSL, New Haven, CT.

\footnote{192} Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol. 2, 79. Song declared that “During the last nine years of my travels I have seen several hundred thousand born again.” Others have been slightly more conservative. William E. Schubert, \textit{I Remember John Sung}, 275, put the number at 100,000—but he only spoke of the conversions during a three year period, not all those converted during his entire ministry. Lian Xi, \textit{Redeemed by Fire}, 10, used 100,000 as an estimate for Sung’s whole career. Sung kept track of all those who came for spiritual transformation in his journal, so conceivably it is possible to know how many people responded to his invitations. However, without access to all the pages I cannot give that figure. Based on the numbers of people that Sung recorded as having responded to his messages during the weeks I studied, I estimate that Sung could have easily had more than 100,000 people respond to his sermons. As noted earlier, some of those people may be counted more than once, as some in the audience had multiple conversions. Nonetheless, I find the evidence sufficient to estimate that Sung was the catalyst for spiritual transformation, or radicalization, in at least 100,000 people’s lives during his career.
been one of unusual blessing, and yet of no baptisms,” going on to explain that
the revival came among those already within the church. “Does it puzzle and shock you to
hear of Church members being saved? It puzzled me,” he confessed. 193 Mary Crawford
who served in Shandong, likewise, noted that, “The [revival] messages were mostly
given in circles where God’s grace had been preached for years.” 194 The services
generated new energy because until the revival “most of the church members, more than
a thousand, had only been converted to Christianity and not to Christ.” 195 In Yungchun,
Wenona Jett wrote her friends that “The majority of them [who came to Sung’s services]
were those who had some contact with the church, students who had left school without
making a decision for Christ, and backsliders of one sort and another.” 196

In his journals, Sung kept records of those who came to the front of the sanctuary
to receive God’s transforming touch. His phrasing was always one form or another of,
“Men and women, about 100, came to the front and dedicated their lives to the Lord,
confessing their sins, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. About four or five people
were saved for the first time.” 197 The intensification of his hearers’ commitment was the
overriding feature of his meetings.

(Edinburgh: R & R Clark, 1933), 15 (italics original).

194 Mary K. Crawford, The Shantung Revival (Shanghai: China Baptist Publication Society, 1933),
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195 Ibid., 14.

196 Wenona Jett to Friends, July 12, 1935, China Records Project RG 8, Box 104, Folder 5, YDSL.

197 Song Shangjie, April 15, 1927, SSD, TTC.
Sung recognized that his audience was Christian. After he adopted revivalism he hardly ever addressed matters such as idol worship. Instead, he explained forthrightly that his objective was “to make church members understand their own sin.” His sermons, therefore, presumed audiences were familiar with biblical characters and stories, and his words were chosen so as to lead “believers to recognize the sin in their hearts, and pray and repent with tears, asking God to save them.” After all, Sung once told his listeners, “It is utterly necessary that a Christian be born again!”

Chen Chonggui [Marcus Cheng], the editor of *Budao zazhi [Evangelism]*, recognized Sung’s intended audience. In 1931 he promised to always print one “article on the gospel designed for people who are outside the church, with the purpose of introducing them to Jesus, and drawing them to believe in the Lord,” and one “article on revival designed for people who are inside the church, hoping that the revival will begin with us!” Without fail, Chen always published Sung’s sermons second. They filled the

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198 In an analysis of the ninety-nine sermons, preached between 1931 and 1939, Sung only referred to idol worship three times. In his earliest years of preaching (1928-1931), Sung apparently preached regularly to non-Christians. The subject comes up several times in Conference reports, and W. B. Cole wrote about it specifically in “A Bible Revival,” *China Christian Advocate* 16, no. 10 (October 1929): 7. After leaving the countryside and starting to preach in cities to Christians, though, Sung came to repudiate those first years of ministry as being without fruit. It may have been because during those early years he had a fairly conciliatory attitude toward Buddhism and its ability to lead people to Christ. It might also be that, in comparison, Sung saw more immediate changes in those who were radicalized Christians compared to those who were changing religious affiliation. See: Song Shangjie, “Make di’erzhang [Mark 2],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 19; Song Shangjie, March 6, 1931.


200 “Wuzhou kongqian weiyoude fenxing budaohui [Wuzhou’s Unprecendented and Never-Seen-Before Revival Evangelistic Meetings],” Zhenguang 32, no. 7 (July 1933): 69.

201 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 52 (italics mine).

slot intended for articles that would heighten the faith commitments of those inside the church.

Sung’s use of polarizing language produced predictable results. Most people were unmoved by it, as evidenced by church rolls. The numbers remained virtually stagnant during Sung’s itinerant years. “Paper numerical gains have been small, if any,” Charles Boynton reported in 1933 when he checked to see if the five-year movement’s aim to double the number of Christians in China was successful. Figures were not much higher a few years later, either, as Sung reached the pinnacle of his career. Nonetheless, a significant minority—almost all of whom were already within the church—were spiritually radicalized. The Christian identity of this group, before Sung ever arrived to preach, belies any suggestion that Sung led tens of thousands of Chinese people into the church. It does help explain, however, how he was able to motivate them to go out of the church and into evangelism.

_Servants of the Coming King_

Radicalized Christians were mobilized Christians. Evangelism was always the last, and most important, step in a person’s conversion. During the revival sins could be confessed and a divided heart overcome, but until someone witnessed about Jesus his or

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203 Michael J. McClymond, ed., _Embodying the Spirit_, 22-24, observed that revivalism has historically evidenced little impact on conversion and church growth. Sung’s revivals duplicated the same pattern.


her spiritual sickness was not completely healed. Sung challenged audiences. For those whose faith had been intensified during a revival, evangelism was prescribed as the necessary means to maintain their zeal and the way in which they could play a meaningful role here and now, at the end of the age.

Sung vividly described the world as embroiled in a final conflict. He told his listeners that history entered into its final stage in 1927. Things were now speeding toward an explosive end. Already, he said, the first four steps in the march to Christ’s return had taken place. False Christs had appeared, war and famine were devastating China, and earthquakes were reported from various places in the world. The end was coming. In the fast-approaching apocalyptic confrontation, on whose side would his audience be?

Evangelizing became the decisive test for determining who, among the people professing to be Christian, would be saved. Sung worried that many of the people who attended the churches started by missionaries were neither hot nor cold, just as scripture


207 Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 1, 152.

208 Song Shangjie, Peilingji [Devotional Messages], 40-41. Sung does not explain why he categorizes the sixth stage of Christian history running from 1517-1927, and the seventh and final stage starting in 1927. Clearly he saw 1927 as having momentous significance, even overshadowing the Reformation. Though Sung was silent on the rationale of his periodization, one is tempted to speculate. 1927 had enormous political significance in China, as it was the time when the Nationalists claimed to unify China. It was also was the launch of the Chinese Christian Church, the united denomination that absorbed about 25% of Protestants? Did Sung see eschatological significance in either act? I doubt it. I believe that Sung saw 1927 as a pivotal year, because he was “converted” at that time. Since he came to see himself as a kind of John the Baptist, his transformation and vocation in February of that year acted as the inaugurator of the final age of humankind.
predicted. Their enthusiasm for Jesus had waned, and they no longer shared the Good News. They were like the church in Laodicea, saying: “I am rich and increased in goods, and have need of nothing,” when in fact they were poor, blind, and naked.209 Instead of focusing on personal evangelism, these so-called Christians had been duped into thinking that clothing, educating, and doctoring the masses could save the nation.210 It did not matter to Sung that the threat of Japan, the challenge of communism, and the possibility of a unified and stable central government inspired most missions in China in the 1930s to invest themselves in “the task of national reconstruction: reconstruction of the spirits, bodies, and villages of the Chinese people.”211 Foolishness, he raged. That was a mistake of eschatological proportions, because it made the church a servant of the state, rather than of Jesus Christ.212 To neglect personal evangelism was to fall into a semi-moribund state. The failure to share the Good News with neighbors was the single biggest proof that a person, or a church, had become lukewarm; it was the evidence that they belonged to the world, were citizens of the earthly kingdom, and that they would be destroyed at Christ’s return.


210 Ibid., 94. Sung tended to link the mission churches Judas. Judas and the churches in China, he believed, became convinced that their purpose was to use money to save people. This outlook, of course, led Judas to betray Jesus. He was the first, but not the last, victim of the social gospel. See, for example, Song Shangjie, “Chuangshiji yu jiaohui lishi [Genesis and Church History],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 23-26; Song Shangjie, “Shituxingzhuang diyizhang [Acts Chapter One],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 28-33.

211 Thomson, *While China Faced West*, 41.

212 *Moshide jidutu dang zhuyide er da wanti* [Two Important Issues End-Time Christians Should be Aware Of] (Beijing: Endiantang, 1963), 41-42.
Evangelism was also the litmus test Sung used to prove whether or not a persona had fallen subject to the other danger Jesus predicted would surface at the end of history, heresy. Whereas the mission churches were described as fulfilling Jesus’ warning that the church would drift away from him at the end, groups like the Little Flock, the Jesus Family, and the True Jesus Church were associated with the anticipated rise of false prophets. During the late 1920s and through the 1930s, these indigenous Christian movements flourished. They rapidly grew throughout China, often by absorbing members from mission churches. But Sung believed the independent churches were liars. He resurrected the politically charged language of heterodoxy to speak of these sects, and thereby decried their teachings as crooked.

Everywhere I go to lead meetings, I hear people say: if you observe the Sabbath you will be saved; if you are baptized by immersion you will be saved; if you speak in tongues you will be saved; if you leave the

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213 Much attention has been given to Sung’s attacks on mission Christianity, but he was equally vociferous in his denunciation of Chinese indigenous Christian movements. This fact has been muted in the scholarship on Sung, presumably because Sung and the independent movements were being tied together historiographically. See, for example, Daniel Bays, “The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937,” in Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present, edited by Daniel H. Bays (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); and Lian Xi, Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

214 Ibid.


216 Song Shangjie, Moshide jidutu dang zhuyide er da wenti [Two Important Issues End-Time Christians Should be Aware Of], 41. For centuries the Chinese state regulated religion through use of the terms zhengjiao and xiejiao. The former expressed the idea of orthodoxy and compatibility with the state; the latter was used to label subversive religious movements as dangerous sects. That language largely disappeared from Republican Chinese political discourse, as modern officials preferred to speak in terms of (licit) religion and (illicit) superstition. Sung’s employment of the imperial language, therefore, was surprising. He reached back to an older vocabulary to accuse his opponents of being threats to the state. See: Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 27.
established churches you will be saved; if women cover their heads they will be saved; if you believe in the True Jesus you will be saved. However, don’t believe them. None of them are saved.\footnote{Song Shangjie, “Yesu zailai [Jesus’ Return],” \textit{Lingsheng} 2, no. 5 (May 1936): 16. The list is a general description of practices associated with independent churches, not an attempt to isolate and condemn any specific one. Sabbath-keeping and head coverings, for instance, were associated with the Little Flock, whereas speaking in tongues and the following the True Jesus were not. Those acts belonged to the True Jesus Church. Sung returned multiple times in his sermons to condemn various independent Christian practices such as those named above. He also worked to undermine their teachings about the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist, or the place of dancing, visions, dreams, and the like in worship. In virtually every case, it is difficult to isolate any one indigenous church as the butt of his attacks, though he appeared to castigate the practices of the Little Flock more than any other. Lian Xi suggests he may have been particularly antagonistic toward followers of Ni Tuosheng [Watchman Nee], since they attended his meetings to “test” the spirit of Sung and determine if his healings were really from God. Lian Xi, e-mail message to author, June 7, 2013. See also W. B. Cole, “Work of the Hinghwa Conference 1925,” unpublished report, Missionary Files, UMC, for a description of how these independent movements looked and worked in Hinghwa, where Sung first encountered them.}

Their claims to having the baptism of the Holy Spirit were spurious. How could one tell? “Witnessing,” he explained to his audience, “is the necessary evidence of being baptized by the Holy Spirit.” Moving people out of their pews and into the world to evangelize was the way to roll back the advance of false teachers, and to prove that those who attended Sung’s meetings really had been saved.

Radicalizing, even if just a minority, was critical for Sung. He believed that inspiring them to testify about Christ had epoch-making significance. Their activism could halt the spread of the social gospel, which Sung considered an export from the West, and their labors could even be the source of “a great revival that will travel from East to West.”\footnote{Song Shangjie, \textit{Fenxingjji [Revival Messages]}, 108.} The work of his converts, in other words, could transform their mission churches, and also churches in Europe and America which had started them. For, “In this
era something out of the ordinary happens.” Similarly, Sung imagined that his mobilized minority could topple the false teachings of the various indigenous movements by evangelizing them. Using martial language, Sung challenged his bands of devotees “to wipe out the false Christs.” If they were faithful in their witness, not only would Christ’s opponents be defeated, but the worldwide revival that would take the gospel to all people just before Jesus’ much-anticipated return would be ignited. Radicalization, and it subsequent mobilization, was not a subsidiary effect of Sung’s revivals. It was a foundational premise upon which they were built.

Conclusion

John Sung utilized revival preaching to mobilize Christians across China and Southeast Asia. Before he learned to do that he took two and a half years to experiment with various preaching styles. His messages varied considerably in the first years he was back in China, but they largely focused on mysteries that he uncovered in the biblical texts. His explication of the hidden wisdom of God gained him some popularity, but the import of his sermons shifted dramatically when he was introduced to the well-developed revivalism of the Bethel Mission in Shanghai.

Intriguingly, the global dimension of his message—his revivalism—did not come from studying in the United States, but through his induction into a node in the holiness

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220 Ibid.

221 Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji* [Revival Messages], 183; see, also, Song Shangjie, *Moshide jidutu dang zhuyide er da wenti* [Two Important Issues End-Time Christians Should be Aware Of], 24.

222 Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji* [Revival Messages], 183; Song Shangjie, *Moshide jidutu dang zhuyide er da wenti* [Two Important Issues End-Time Christians Should be Aware Of], 13-15.
movement’s worldwide network that was situated in China. Bethel’s style of ministry turned Sung’s sermons into a hot-and-noisy event; they became theater on the grandest scale. During the meetings, he convinced many of those who gathered before him that he was God’s anointed messenger blessed with supernatural experiences, and therefore imbued with supernatural authority. He achieved this, in part, through passionate exhortations from the Bible based on stock material.

Sung messages constantly urged people to choose for God now. To wait was folly. The old was passing away, Christ was about to come. His differentiation between this age and the next was extraordinarily sharp. It generated endless dualisms in Sung’s rhetoric. The distinctions were so sharp that to accept his message was to be radicalized; it required a determination to convert the alternatives. His revivals, therefore, mobilized audiences. Not everyone was energized by his dualistic message, but a sizable minority of the Christian community intensified their spiritual commitments through Sung’s bold proclamation of the gospel.
CHAPTER THREE
CLASS AND CONVERSION

The international holiness movement that Sung entered through the Bethel Mission expanded his ministry. It taught him revivalism, a potent style of ministry that had burned through parts of Europe and the United States, and had sparked intense spiritual awakening in places like Chile, India, Korea, and Ruanda. The movement also connected Sung to a network that was larger than anything he could have imagined in his village evangelism. He now had access to urban centers spread across China and throughout Southeast Asia.

China’s cities were differentiating their citizenry in new ways. Industrialization did not continue to segment society into village landowners, scholars, or tenant farmers. New forms of class organization were taking shape. Who, in that new economy, came to hear Sung preach? What was it about his sermons that attracted them? This chapter will explore the links between class and conversion in Sung’s ministry.

Going Solo

Sung poured his volcanic energy into the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band. He was rewarded by a rapid ascent through the organization, but his climb did not stop at the ceiling. He burst clean through. In November 1933, thirty months after he first joined the team, he received a telegram from Jennie Hughes that she was dissolving the Bethel
Band. It would be reconstituted under the original leadership of Ji Zhiwen, and Sung would not be included.¹

The reasons for Sung’s dismissal were layered. In her telegram, Hughes explained her decision as the logical outcome of Sung’s plan to assume a pastoral position in Beiping [Beijing]. Sung, however, insisted she misunderstood. True, some of the evangelistic teams, which the Bethel Band had organized in the city, had spoken together and were eager to receive Sung as their pastor, but that did not mean he was plotting to depart.² But it was too late to make repairs, the relationship between Hughes and Sung had already unraveled. For some time, Hughes had been frustrated that Sung was accepting personal gifts and even financial donations from enthusiastic converts. Those were all to be given to the Bethel Mission and used for the support of the entire Band.³ In addition, the power struggles within the team could no longer be ignored. When the Bethel Band was at full capacity, it had been possible for Sung and Ji, the two powerful preachers, to occasionally separate. They could each take one or two of the younger

¹ Song Shangjie, November 20, 1933, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore (henceforth, SSD, TTC).

² Song Shangjie, November 20, 1933, SSD, TTC. Even after Sung’s protests to the contrary, and his clear intention to work solo, Bethel continued to print that Sung planned to become a pastor. See: Shenjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness] 6, no. 1 (January 1934): 64. It was virtually the only reference Bethel made to Sung after he departed from the mission. In the first issue of the Shenjie zhinan yuekan that was printed after Sung left the team, Jennie Hughes broke custom and wrote the editorial. She made enigmatic statements that in 1933 Bethel had been tested, but she announced that God had been faithful to the organization. Whereas Bethel used to have only one evangelistic team, now it would send out more than ten. With that, Sung disappeared from the Bethel Mission records until decades later. Under new leadership, the Bethel Mission could celebrate what God had done through the first Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band. See: Jiushizhounian ganentekan [Special Ninetieth Anniversary Thanksgiving Publication] (Hong Kong, 2011), 19.

³ Lian Xi, Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 150.
members, and hold their own separate revivals. It was a way for the popular Band to cover more ground; it was also a way to let both men lead.4 That, however, was no longer a tenable solution. Earlier in the year, Li Daorong and Nie Ziying, the two unmarried members of the team who had been the focus of young women’s attention, had been removed.5 The remaining team of three could no longer be divided. That left Sung and Ji in an unremitting struggle for dominance. Hughes’s telegram signaled the resolution of the conflict: Ji was the anointed leader; Sung had to go. Frustrated, Sung accused Hughes of envy. She was like Saul who could not stand the success of his loyal subject David. Sung denounced her decision as imperialistic, and predicted that within two months the Bethel Mission would suffer the consequence of letting its finest preacher depart.6

As the Bethel Band collapsed in November 1933 under the combined weight of Hughes’s autocratic authority and Sung’s unchecked ambition, the revivalist plummeted into unknown waters. He was on his own. When he first returned to China the Hinghwa Methodist Episcopal Church had given him considerable latitude when he began meandering around his home district preaching, but the Conference also supplied him with money and direction.7 Similarly, when Sung joined the Bethel Band, he could focus

5 Lian, 150.
6 Song Shangjie, November 20, 1933, SSD, TTC; Song Shangjie, November 21, 1933, SSD, TTC.
7 See the Official Minutes of the Hinghwa Annual Conference, 1928-1930. Sung did not draw a large salary as “Conference Evangelist,” but at least by the time he became a deacon in 1930, Sung drew a salary of $15 a month ($9 for himself, $4 more because he was married, and an additional $2 since he was a graduate of Guthrie High School).
on being an evangelist, as the Bethel Mission managed the scheduling and financing of revival services. Without that organizational support, Sung temporarily floundered.

With the advantage of hindsight, Sung publicized years later that this was a period of waiting on God. Did God want him to continue as an independent evangelist? If so, God would need to prompt people from five provinces to invite him to speak and provide 800 yuan for traveling expenses. The image was entirely passive, making no mention of Sung’s energetic efforts to recruit new personal speaking engagements.

In fact, before he left Changsha, the city in which he first heard that his relationship with Bethel was being terminated, Sung had convinced Chen Chonggui [Marcus Ch’eng] of the Hunan Bible Institute to help. Chen had risen to national prominence as editor of the popular periodical Budao zazhi [Evangelism]. The magazine had an impressive circulation of 4,500-5,000 subscribers, dwarfing the circulations of the majority of Christian periodicals, which ran 500-1000 copies every month. It was a great victory, therefore, when Chen announced in the next issue:

This year Evangelism plans to print one of Dr. Song Shangjie’s sermons in every issue. Dr. Song preached in Changsha for ten days. God greatly used him. The church was often far too small. In the last month or so, the results have still been visible; his services did not merely produce temporary emotions. While he was in Changsha he stayed below the dorm,

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so I had the opportunity to get to know him very well. Off the platform, I know his character to be even more likable and honorable.\textsuperscript{11}

Chen did more than provide a character reference. He also added that Sung would follow the Lord’s leading in offering revival meetings, and provided Sung’s address in Shanghai so interested readers could contact him.\textsuperscript{12} Apparently Sung placed a similar announcement in other Christian periodicals.\textsuperscript{13} He purposely sought invitations to preach.

His persistence was rewarded. A few weeks after the publication of the periodicals, Sung believed his call to independent itinerant evangelism was confirmed.\textsuperscript{14} With multiple invitations and money in hand, Sung started to make his way north from Shanghai in mid-January 1934, and he held revivals in Jiangsu and Anhui provinces. By early February he was in Shandong province, and spent the next two months there, largely revisiting the places where he had led revivals when he was with Bethel. News of his activities spread, and at the end of March, messengers from Tianjin traveled some 300 miles to the southwest to call upon Sung in Yantai. They asked him to come back to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[12] Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
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Tianjin where, in 1932, he and the Bethel team had held an extraordinarily long twenty-day revival campaign.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Circumscribed by the City}

Sung immediately agreed to speak in Tianjin. The urban setting suited him well. In fact, his career was built around cities.\textsuperscript{16} Revivalism grew alongside urbanization in China in the 1930s, as it had in the United States a century before. Cities provided the combustible materials that seemed only to await a spark from a revivalist’s tongue.\textsuperscript{17} First, urban areas had a critical mass of people. Since revival services were events not beliefs, “protracted meetings and other special activities accompanying revivals require[d] numbers of people with sufficient free time to attend meetings and enough capital to support [them].”\textsuperscript{18} Such an audience was almost exclusively available in China’s cities. Second, revivalism’s insistence that sinners needed to revive or recover something that was lost made sense to urban residents.\textsuperscript{19} Nowhere else in the nation had longstanding models of home and work been more disrupted than in its cities. Third,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} Song Shangjie, ed. \textit{Quanguo jidutu budaotuan tuankan [National Christian Evangelistic Team Report] 1, no. 2 (Shanghai: Glory Church)}, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Richard Lee Rogers, “The Urban Threshold and the Second Great Awakening: Revivalism in New York State, 1825-1835,” \textit{Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion} 49, no. 4 (2010): 694-709. Rogers demonstrated that during the Second Great Awakening the factor that best predicted a religious revival was urbanization.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 699.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 700.
\end{itemize}
urban revivals spread from city to city through the infrastructure that tied China’s urban areas together in the first half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{20} Events in Beiping [Beijing] could trigger responses hundreds of miles away in Shanghai or Guangzhou within hours, whereas it might take weeks to spread the news around Beiping’s hinterlands, assuming someone even thought it important enough to try.\textsuperscript{21} In some ways, then, revivals were both fueled and confined by the communication lines that linked cities together. They carried reports of revival out to other cities and carried invitations in for the revivalist to expand his work in other urban settings. The countryside was almost entirely omitted. For these reasons, Chinese revivalism had a distinctly urban imprint.\textsuperscript{22}

At the time, however, China had few cities. The country had a population over 500 million, but only 193 places were considered to have crossed the urban threshold, that is having a population that topped 50,000 people.\textsuperscript{23} The inhabitants of China’s cities

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} David Strand, “‘A High Place is No Better Than a Low Place’: The City in the Making of Modern China,” in \textit{Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond}, edited by Wen-hsin Yeh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
\item \textsuperscript{21} The most famous examples of how information traveled primarily between the cities include the revolution of 1911, and the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Incidents closer to the time of Sung’s services in Tianjin would have been the anti-Christian movement that exploded in response to a WSCF meeting in Beijing in 1922, and organized boycotts after the May 30\textsuperscript{th} Incident in 1925. See: Yip Ka-che, \textit{Religion, Nationalism and Chinese Students: The Anti-Christian Movement of 1922-1927} (Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, 1980).
\item \textsuperscript{22} Daniel H. Bays, “Christian Revival in China, 1900-1937,” in \textit{Modern Christian Revivals}, edited by Edith L. Blumhofer and Randall Balmer (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1993), 161-179. Bays places the origins of Chinese revivalism in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. He does not describe it as a phenomenon related to China’s urbanization, but to the fact that the Christian presence was finally old enough in China that it could focus on more than conversion. It could also revive those who had been converted. Bays makes an important point. Nonetheless, signs do exist that even the early revivals had an urban connection. Jonathan Goforth’s Manchurian revivals, with which Bays begins his surveys of Chinese revivalism, started in Manchuria’s urban centers of Mukden and Liaoyang.
\end{itemize}
accounted for but eight percent of the national population. Yet it was among that minority population that Sung learned his trade. When he joined Bethel in 1931, he left behind the village evangelism associated with his work in the Hinghwa Conference. Bethel was located in Shanghai and catered to urban audiences. Sung had to learn to preach for an organization that overwhelmingly held its services in China’s cities. While he was with the team, the Bethel Band traveled extensively by rail and steamboat, covering more than 50,000 li in its first two years. Yet the distances were almost entirely from one city to the next. Three-quarters of the team’s services were conducted in urban areas. In addition, 33 of their 84 campaigns were repeat performances. In other words, 39% of Bethel’s work was conducted in just thirteen treaty port cities. The Band traveled much, but only to a few destinations.

Little changed when Sung launched out on his own. If anything, the urbanization of his ministry intensified. When he left Bethel in 1933, Sung penned in his journal the idea: “Maybe God is going to use me to go to big cities to evangelize first, and then there

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will be opportunities to go to the United States of America.”

Between Sung’s departure from Bethel and the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, which marked the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Sung specifically targeted China’s urban areas. In the mainland, he spoke in cities almost 85% of the time. More than half of his 96 revival campaigns were held in just thirteen treaty port cities. Sung primarily kept to a narrow circuit of foreign-influenced cities.

The Example of Tianjin

The transition of Sung’s services from the treaty port of Yantai to the treaty port of Tianjin in April 1934 conformed to his overall pattern of moving from one city to

26 Song Shangjie, November 21, 1933, SSD, TTC.

27 The times Sung did not speak in cities during this time period are pretty easily accounted for. Most of those happened when he returned to his home district in Fujian, and spoke at some of the churches where his evangelistic ministry first began. The reasons for visiting the other smaller venues may have been similar to why Sung preached in Daming, Hebei. Nazarene missionaries hosted Sung in that town because, as relative latecomers to China, the holiness denomination was forced to work on the periphery of China’s core regions. The urban centers, Nazarenes discovered, had long been ceded to the older denominations in comity agreements. Thus the wave of new holiness, Pentecostal, and independent missions that flooded China after 1911 often moved into China’s hinterlands. Although geographically isolated from Sung’s eastern seaboard services, many embraced his message and revival tactics. The theological kinship between Sung and some of his hosts may explain his sporadic visits to towns. See: Peter Kiehn, The Legacy of Peter and Anna Kiehn, Unpublished manuscript, Biography, Kiehn Collection (file 192-61), Nazarene Archives, Kansas City, Missouri; Peter Kiehn, “A Sketch of Our Work in China,” The Other Sheep (October 1923): 16; H.A. Wiese, “China Crusaders,” The Other Sheep (August 1935): 12; L.C. Osborn, “God’s Blessing at Fan Hsien,” The Other Sheep (September 1935): 17; H.A. Wiese, “Blind Receives Sight, Dumb Speaks,” The Other Sheep (May 1936): 21-22; Katherine Wiese, “A Bible School Student,” The Other Sheep (February 1942): 23; Daryl R. Ireland, “Unbound: The Creative Power of Scripture in the Lives of Chinese Nazarene Women.” Wesleyan Theological Journal 46, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 168-192; Daniel H. Bays, “The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937,” in Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present, edited by Daniel H. Bays, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 307-316.

28 The 13 treaty port cities that Bethel visited between May 1931 and December 1933 and the 13 Sung spoke in alone between January 1934 and July 1937 were not completely identical. They overlapped in eight cities: Fuzhou, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Qingdao, Shanghai, Shantou, Tianjin, and Yantai.
another. The only unusual feature was that he showed up without a place to preach. Accounts vary as to what exactly transpired. Some in Tianjin reported rather blandly that, “At the time…the church was not able to lend [its building].” Sung, was less sanguine. He wrote in *Gongzuode huigu [Review of My Ministry]* that he had been under the impression that a local church had invited him, but it turned out that it was—in fact—just “a group of people who loved the Lord.” When they tried to get access to the Wesley Church of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the congregation did not consent to their request. In his journal from the time, he phrased things even stronger: Sung had wired the Wesley Church in Tianjin concerning the time and place of his arrival. When he disembarked from that boat on April 10, 1934, however, he discovered that a committee at the church had voted 8-7 to bar him from holding services. Sung, who was sometimes inclined to paranoia, suspected that committee members were bribed. He was exasperated by their unhelpful explanation that revival services were held “too often” and there were “too many [of them].”

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29 In 1935, Tianjin was China’s third largest city, and had been a treaty port for 75 years. Between the two World Wars, it always ranked second or third in direct foreign trade, and therefore attracted a significant foreign presence. At various times, the city was been divided into British, French, Japanese, German, Italian, Austro-Hungarian, Belgian, Russian, and American concessions. See: Gail Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986).

30 Song Shangjie, ed. *Quanguo jidutu budaotuan tuankan [National Christian Evangelistic Team Report]* 1, no. 2, 32.


32 See chapter 1.

33 Song Shangjie, April 10, 1934, SSD, TTC.
Unfortunately no other data exists, inviting one to speculate about Sung’s cool reception. It seems unlikely, for instance, that the church was really too concerned about the frequency of revival services. In fact, the congregation seemed to relish its place as “the center of many Christian activities in Tientsin [Tianjin].” Sherwood Eddy held revivals in Wesley Church only months before Sung arrived with the Bethel Band in 1932. In 1933, the congregation boasted that with the South Suburb Church in Tianjin, they had combined to hold five revivals in one year. Multiple and extended revival campaigns in the same church were not that unusual.

The problem could have been that when Sung departed from Bethel his name was tarnished. Indeed, a number of Christians could not help but cast a wary eye on his independent ministry. For example, the Presbyterian missionary Frank Millican praised the Bethel Band after it reconstituted itself without Sung. He signaled his joy that team work had superseded “‘Lone wolfin’ evangelism.” It took little imagination to know who was the lone wolf. But it was something of a disingenuous comment, insofar as in the same article Millican endorsed the independent ministries of Wang Zai [Leland

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34 The Official Journal of the Forty-Second Session of the North China Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held at the South Gate Methodist Episcopal Church, Tientsin, Hopei, China, August 22-26, 1934 ([Beijing?): 1934), 334.

35 The Official Journal of the Forty-First Session of the North China Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, August 23-27, 1933 ([Beijing?): 1933).

36 Zhenguang [True Light] 31, no. 7 (1932), 86; and Zhenguang [True Light] 32, no. 7 (July 1933), 69, hint at the frequency of revivals. Churches in Wuzhou, Guangxi reported in Zhenguang an “unprecedented” revival led by the Bethel Band in 1932. The same churches said the same thing about their revival of 1933. Revivals were common, even formulaic events. Sung’s return to Tianjin just two years after holding services in the city with Bethel would not have been a problem for most churches.
Wang], Chen Chonggui [Marcus Ch’eng], or Zhao Junying [Calving Chao].37 There was something specific to Sung, Millican seemed to suggest, that made him dangerous. In that vein, the Methodist leadership in Tianjin may have blocked Sung using the Wesley Church because people were wary of his freelance ministry.

Alternatively, or in addition, Sung may have been barred because of church politics. During his career, Sung’s revivals prompted Methodist leaders to circle their wagons on more than one occasion. It can hardly be coincidental that immediately after Sung’s revivals, Methodist leadership found it necessary to warn the faithful about outside evangelists: “[W]e urge pastors and local officials to give permission only to preachers who are personally known to them or who carry certificates from dependable leaders of the church.”38 Or, in another place:

[P]astors invite evangelists without consulting the D.S. We should get together on this matter. The Discipline does not permit the pastors or church members to invite evangelists without consulting the District Superintendent. We need to get a list of the men within our own Conference who lead in evangelistic work.39

Even Sung’s erstwhile supporter, the Board of Foreign Missions’s Secretary for China, Japan, Korea and East Asia, Frank Cartwright, developed doubts about Sung. He

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38 *Minutes of the Forty-Fourth Session of the Malaya Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church held in Wesley Church, Singapore, Straits Settlements, January 2-7, 1936* ([Singapore]: 1936), 74.

expressed “personal regret” over the way Sung’s ministry evolved.\textsuperscript{40} It is quite possible, therefore, that whispers about Sung being an unapproved outsider preceded his arrival in Tianjin and thereby prevented him from securing the use of Wesley Church. No solid evidence from Tianjin exists, however, to confirm one way or another why Sung was rebuffed.

Happily, for the purposes of this chapter, why Sung could not secure a church venue for his revivals is less relevant than how his supporters dealt with it— that “group of people who loved the Lord.” For the way the group handled with the crisis allows one to begin piecing together the social composition of Sung’s backers. What otherwise would have remained hidden was, in Tianjin, briefly revealed.

\textbf{An Urban Gospel of Conservative Modernization}

\textbf{Bourgeois Backers}

The sting of rejection forced Sung’s supporters to fast, pray, cry, and then—within twenty-four hours—successfully rent the Li Yuanhong Great Ceremonial Hall.\textsuperscript{41} The details of the transaction are not recorded, but it is worth pausing to consider what can be discovered in this swift relocation of Sung’s services.

First, it suggests that the small group who invited Sung to Tianjin were rich. They were able to mobilize enough liquid capital in one day to rent a grand and impressive

\textsuperscript{40} Frank T. Cartwright to Early R. Hibbard, August 7, 1935, \textit{Missionary Files: Methodist Church, 1912-1949}, N. China, Clay, E. H. (continued) to Wen Middle School, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1999), roll 70.

\textsuperscript{41} Song Shangjie, April 10, 1934, TTC, SSD.
building in Tianjin’s English Concession that could seat 700-800 people. The surprise of this feat can be appreciated only when one recognizes the brutal economic circumstances that were choking the city. Tianjin was dying in 1934. The effects of the worldwide Depression leached virtually every bit of life from Tianjin’s mills, while cannibalistic taxes devoured what remained of their industrial carcasses. Unemployment that year reached 742,076 people, or 62.5% of the city’s population. Almost two-thirds of the people in the city would have had no money to give for renting a hall. Those families who did have at least one person gainfully employed had little to no disposable income. In the late 1920s, working families in Tianjin put almost all their money into food. From what was left over a little went to rent, fuel, and clothing. This left the average working family an annual surplus of only three yuan [USD $.60-.75]. They could not have mustered the resources to secure a place for Sung to speak so quickly. The backers were moneyed.

42 Ibid.; “Jidujiao budao tuan: qing Song Shangjie boshi jiagyan [Christian Evangelistic League Invites Dr. John Sung to Speak],” Tianjin dagong bao, April 15, 1934, Section 3, page 10. The price of the hall remains tantalizingly out of reach. The number Sung recorded in his journal put the price in the hundreds. How many hundreds, however, is illegible. See: April 11, 1934.

43 Hershatter, The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949, 32, 34.

44 Ibid., 45. Unemployment was endemic to Tianjin in 1934, though Hershatter notes that the rate is probably inflated. A number of the “unemployed” could get occasional work as “day-laborers,” which provided some money, even if it was inconsistent. The larger point, however, holds true. The vast majority of people were in a financial crisis with little to nothing to give for renting a revival hall.

45 Ibid., 68. According to Brett Sheehan, Trust in Troubled Times: Money, Banks, and State-Society Relations in Republican Tianjin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), xiii, 1 yuan was equivalent to USD $.20 to USD $.25 at the time.
Indeed, the leader of the Tianjin Evangelistic League, whom the newspaper reported as having sponsored the revival, was a successful entrepreneur.\textsuperscript{46} Zhang Zhouxin started and owned \textit{Huabei maoyi gongsi} [Northern China Trade Company]. He had been converted through Sung’s preaching in 1932, when the Bethel Band held a revival in Tianjin. At the end of the services he and his wife Chen Sanli, an obstetrician who started and operated her own clinic, worked to organize the evangelistic bands that Bethel launched before their departure.\textsuperscript{47} Additionally, Sung had the ardent support of Li Fenglin, the wife of Guan Songsheng. Guan was a prominent figure in Republican China. After graduating from Tsinghua University, he had studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and city planning at Harvard. When he returned to China, he founded \textit{Tianjin chuangjiande jitai gongsi} [Kwan, Chu and Yang Architects and Engineers of Tianjin], the first Chinese owned and operated architectural and engineering firm in the nation.\textsuperscript{48} Guan’s Tianjin-based firm tended to build high-profile buildings that represented China’s modernization. For instance, in 1931 his company erected the Central Hospital in the Nationalist capital, Nanjing. They also designed that city’s athletic stadium, a project close to Guan’s heart.\textsuperscript{49} He was a firm believer in the value of sports, and worked to overcome the stereotyped image of the “sick man of the

\textsuperscript{46} “Jidujiao budaotuan: qing Song Shangjie boshi jiangyan [Christian Evangelist League Invites Dr. John Sung to Deliver Speeches,” \textit{Tianjin yongbao}, April 15, 1934, Section 3, page 5.


\textsuperscript{49} Jianfei Zhu, \textit{Architecture of Modern China: A Critique} (New York: Routledge, 2009), 58.
East.” Guan spent his own money and resources promoting China in the Asian and Olympic games, as well as in his efforts to find talented Chinese athletes.\(^{50}\) Guan Songsheng was not a Christian himself, but he was sympathetic to it insofar as he noted the improvements it made in his wife’s behavior.\(^{51}\) In terms of securing a place for Sung to preach, the key was not Guan Songsheng’s personal faith, but that his family, like Zhang Zhouxin’s, had financial resources.

Second, these families had connections. The place they rented belonged to the former President of the Republic of China, Li Yuanhong. Like most politicians of his generation, Li had a colorful and convoluted career. He began his political ascendance through the military. Stationed in Wuchang on October 10, 1911, Li found himself at the heart of the Revolution. Though he was not inclined to join the uprising, the revolutionaries coveted his support, and convinced the colonel to assume leadership of the revolution as an alternative to being shot. The first proclamations of the revolution, therefore, went out to the rest of the country in his name.\(^{52}\) Yuan Shikai, the general who was dispatched by the Manchu Court to subdue the revolt, recognized Li’s power. When Yuan chose to negotiate with the rebels rather than fight them, he accepted their offer to be President of the Republic, but moved quickly thereafter to co-opt Li Yuanhong’s authority. He wanted Li to make a display of his support and his subservience by

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\(^{51}\) Song Shangjie, April 11, 1934, SSD, TTC.

becoming Yuan’s Vice President. Li, however, recognized the proposal for what it was, and therefore showed no enthusiasm for the offer. He repeatedly postponed making a trip to Beijing. The standoff was only resolved when President Yuan had his minister of war enter Li’s home by force, read him his summons to be Vice President, and then escort him at gun point to the capital to receive his honor. Embittered by the experience, Li adopted a posture of passive non-cooperation, and—for those interested in the development of Chinese Christianity—hired David T. Z. Yui to be his personal secretary.\textsuperscript{53} Two years later, when Yuan Shikai died, Li Yuanhong became president for the first time.\textsuperscript{54}

Li found that it was necessary and yet impossible to govern the new nation through regional warlords. During his brief presidency, Li was the victim of the changing allegiances and aspirations of the military leaders who effectively controlled Northern China, and so resigned from office just 13 months into his first term. His temporary withdrawal from politics, however, was not a withdrawal from public life.

Li built himself an impressive complex in the English concession of Tianjin, and did what other warlords and politicos did: he invested in a cotton mill. “The principal investors in the Tianjin cotton mills belonged to the bureaucracy that controlled the northern provinces and the Peking government. All of the 25 shareholders recorded [except two] held or had in the past held important posts in the civil or military

\textsuperscript{53} Yui [Yu Rizhang] moved from being Li Yuanhong’s personal secretary in 1912 to being the national secretary of the YMCA in 1913. From that position he maintained a dominant presence in Chinese Christianity for the next two decades.

\textsuperscript{54} Yuan-Tsung Chen, \textit{Return to the Middle Kingdom: One Family, Three Revolutionaries, and the Birth of Modern China} (New York: Union Square Press, 2008), 48.
Li’s stake in the Huaxin mill, one of the four Chinese-owned mills that dominated Tianjin’s industry, kept him in the upper echelon of Chinese powerbrokers. It was also from there that he entered the presidency for a second time in 1922.56

Although Li Yuanhong died in 1928, the fact that some of Sung’s supporters had access to his family and estate spoke volumes about their social circle. They were not only able to secure the family Hall, but they even convinced some of the family to attend services.57 The number of Tianjin’s elites who supported Sung was small, apparently just two people, but the fact that he had even two people backing him from the minuscule number of Chinese bourgeoisie was significant. It indicated that Sung’s revivals were, in some measure, intertwined with China’s urban elite.

Sung’s Association with China’s Elite

Sung capitalized on the prestige of Zhang Zhouxin and Li Fenglin. In a sense, he borrowed it from them. While in Tianjin, he stayed in the home of Guan Songsheng and Li Fenglin. There he enjoyed the service of their six or seven servants (he was not sure of the exact number).58 Mid-mornings, Sung regularly indulged in a game of yinquiu—something akin to bocce ball—and then rode in the Guan family automobile to the Li


57 Song Shangjie, April 18, 1934, SSD, TTC. Mrs. Guan told Sung that Li’s daughter and sister attended and were moved by the service, but they were unwilling to confess their sins and thereby lose face.

58 Ibid.
Yuanhong Great Ceremonial Hall to speak in the afternoon. Although cars were common
enough in Tianjin, to actually ride in one was extraordinary. A taxi ride was beyond the
experience and grasp of almost everyone in the city. For Sung to disembark from one,
therefore, indicated to his observers that he was enjoying certain privileges.

One of the keys to his success, however, was that Sung was able to maintain that
the rank and wealth were not his own. Never mind that in just the two-day transition from
Yantai to Tianjin, Sung had recorded that gifts and sales of his autobiography and a
734 yuan. He would do even better in Tianjin, where in two and an half weeks people
gave him somewhere between 768 yuan and 2,498 yuan. Such an impressive influx of
money would not put Sung in the stratosphere with China’s extremely wealthy, but it was
certainly more than most people in Tianjin earned. Weaver and sock makers, for example,

59 Hanchao Lu, Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 14.

60 Song Shangjie, April 9-11, 1934, SSD, TTC; Song Shangjie, April 27-28, 1934, SSD, TTC;
Shengjie zhinan yuexian [Guide to Holiness], 6, no. 1 (January 1934): 64.

61 Despite Sung’s meticulous bookkeeping in his journal, the amount of money that was given to
him in Tianjin is unclear. The question surrounds 1,730.82 yuan that he recorded receiving on April 28,
1934. The money, he noted, was given in the afternoon. That was the same time that an offering was to be
taken so his supporters could purchase their own church building. If that 1,700 yuan is added to the 6,000
yuan that was raised earlier for the building, then it would explain why Sung—who was obviously relying
on his own journals—claimed in his later memoir that the revival in Tianjin raised between 7,000-8,000
yuan for a new church building. (See, Song Shangjie, Gongzuode huigu [Review of My Ministry]
(Singapore: Singapore Christian Evangelistic League, 1960), 21.) On the other hand, the money may have
been given to him for personal use. Every time Sung received money that was not for his personal use, he
wrote explicitly what it was to be used for. For instance, the 6000 yuan that was given to him for the new
church building was duly recorded as such. His silence in this case, therefore, suggests the 1700 yuan might
have been given to him personally. It is also worth considering that in her publication of her father’s
journals, Song Tianzhen does not mention the 1730.82 yuan. This is consistent with her avoidance of
mentioning any money that John Sung ever earned, whereas she was comfortable reporting the 6,000 yuan
raised for the church building. (See: Song Tianzhen, Shi-er fude de riji [The Journal Once Lost] (Kowloon,
Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 2006), 213.) Therefore, I am slightly inclined to believe the 1730 yuan
ledger entry was part of Sung’s income in Tianjin, making his earnings for three weeks 2,498 yuan.
made 288 yuan in a whole year; mill hands, 261 yuan; and, handicraft workers had an annual income of 177 yuan. Sung was actually very well off. He just seldom showed it.

Through thank-offerings, the sale of his books, and unsolicited gifts, Sung generated significant money. Furthermore, he spent very little. When he was in a city, those who invited him to preach took the responsibility of feeding him and providing him a place to say. In extraordinary circumstances it was conceivable that he might pay for travel, but—as he learned from his time with the Bethel Mission—a faith ministry usually meant only foregoing a specific fee for services. It did not mean that travel expenses fell on the evangelist. The upshot, therefore, was that Sung had enough money to rent a shikumen dwelling for his family in the French Concession of Shanghai. “The French Concession,” as Marie-Claire Bergère observed, “had a population of 115,946 in 1910, [and] had reached 297,072 by 1925…. The price of buildings rose together with, or even more swiftly than, the population figures.” In other words, while the exact cost of Sung’s housing is unknown, his house was in the part of the city that had the highest

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62 Hershatter, 68.

63 The Bethel Band’s understanding of “faith ministry” seems to have shaped Song’s own practice of it. In Shengjie zhinan [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 4 (April 1931): 10, Bethel explained that the team would “rely on faith. They would not solicit funds where they go. They will follow Jesus’ instructions from Matthew 10 on how to stay in a place [each city provides food and lodging]. If a church would like to have the team preach, they are very ready to agree. We only ask that you contact them before hand to negotiate the matter with them.” This meant that “thank offerings” were always welcome, and travel expenses usually underwritten by the host church or institution. See: Jennie V. Hughes, Bethel Heart Throbs of Revival, 1931 (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1931), 62-63; Jennie V. Hughes, Bethel Heart Throbs: Surprises, 1932 (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1932), 66.

64 Chen Chonggui, “Bianji zhihou,” Budao zazhi [Evangelism], 110; Song Shangjie, Fenxingji [Revival Messages] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1990), 153. A shikumen was the housing of China’s petty urbanites. It was not opulent, but neither was it associated with the homes of the working class.

65 Bergère, 102.
population density, and was therefore in the place where demand drove housing costs higher than anywhere else in Shanghai and, by extension, higher than anywhere else in China. Sung certainly had money; his genius was not flaunting it.

This strategy allowed Sung to accomplish two seemingly contradictory things before his audiences. First, his decision to operate his revivals by faith, that is, dependent upon the goodwill and donations of others, meant Sung appeared to live day-to-day. Just as most workers in Tianjin’s economy of 1934 could do no better than find day jobs as casual laborers, so Sung could do nothing more than preach today, and hope to find someone willing to pay for him to do it again tomorrow. He famously wore “the common, blue cotton gown of the ordinary coolie,” eschewing Western fashions or even the more sophisticated robe associated with Chinese scholars. The way he handled his money and presented his ministry allowed Sung to identify with the precarious lives of the people in Tianjin.

66 Bergère, 102-103; Lu, 137, estimates that anyone living in a shikumen in Shanghai, even if it was sub-divided into multiple families sharing the one dwelling, needed to earn about 1,200 yuan a year.

67 Hershatter, 45; Sung would sometimes insert into his sermons reminders that he had needs, but that his audience could meet them. His comments never required people to support him, but they did remind the audience that he was dependent on their support. He might explain, “I am a non-salaried preacher. What I need God sends.” He would then proceed to explain, for example, how when he went to Manchuria he had no coat, but someone in a revival meeting gave him one for free. In Tianjin, he received an influx of items from numerous people as an expression of love and gratitude right before he left, including: silk handkerchiefs, shoes, socks, woolen goods, a new blue gown, stamps, a leather-bound Bible, pants, and—of course—money. See, Song Shangjie, *Forty Sermons by John Sung*, vol. 2 (Singapore: Alice Doo, 1983), 50; Song Shangjie, April 27-28, 1934, SSD, TTC.

But, and this is the second point, Sung’s own money and his intimate connection to the wealthy meant he was always more than just one of the poor. Even such simple acts as getting out of the car with Li Fenglin allowed Sung to appropriate the mantle of the Guan family’s success. It communicated that he was hobnobbing with Tianjin’s upper-class, enjoying their friendships, and—in the case of Mrs. Guan—basking in her reverence. Sung had made it. He embodied the dreams of many aspiring urbanites: he rode in cars, relaxed with the wealthy, and even enjoyed fame (a postcard of Sung was available for purchase). He looked to be the poor boy who had made good.

This dual identity allowed Sung’s messages to cut two ways. At times he could sound like an angry populist. His sharp tongue could flay China’s wealthy and powerful, the tiny portion of China’s vast population, for their corrosive exploitation of the masses. “[M]any capitalists there are,” one can almost hear him spit bitterly, “who exploit and profiteer because they do not believe in heaven or hell.” They live sumptuous lives, he explained, calloused to the suffering all around them—even just outside their own doors. The bourgeoisie were current incarnations of Dives, the rich landlord who despised the beggar Lazarus in Jesus’ parable recorded in Luke 16:19-31.

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69 See, for example, Song Shangjie, April 10-13, 1934 SSD, TTC.


71 Lu, 63. Lu estimated that Shanghai’s bourgeoisie was but 1% of the population; Tianjin’s proportion would have been smaller.


73 Ibid., 20.
Dives eternal fate in hell was emblematic of the fate that awaited all of China’s wealthy elites, for—as he was wont to point out—the more money you have the less faith you possess. Whenever Sung referenced capitalists in his sermon illustrations, he determinedly cast them in the negative role. When preaching about Peter and John’s arrest by the Sanhedrin in Acts 3, for instance, Sung’s dichotomous thinking about the matter appeared: “Many church-members today cringe before the rich and the capitalist.” Notice: the church-members and rich capitalists are presented as differentiated groups—true disciples versus powerful persecutors. There could be virtually no overlap in Sung’s thinking, because such a person, the capitalist, was “a sinner through and through.”

That said, Sung’s own association with China’s elite prompted him to rehabilitate their image in alternative ways. He did this through the logic of the revival narrative. The Chinese bourgeoisie were presented as lost and spiritually dead, but their lives could be entirely changed during a revival. Rhetorically this meant that a capitalist’s conversion could look like a rich person selling all his possessions and giving to the poor, but in fact Sung never enforced those words of Jesus. On the contrary, he seemed to appreciate the addition of their money, position, and power to the church. A careful examination of his sermons indicates that Sung frequently elevated the conversions of the rich and powerful

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74 Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji* [Revival Messages], 152.
75 Ibid., 63.
76 Ibid., 27.
77 Song Shangjie, *Peilingji* [Devotional Messages] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, n.d.), 17.
for others to emulate. Although they were a tiny minority, their money and status made
them exemplary converts. For instance, the story circulated about a massive revival Sung
held in Beiping [Beijing]. Things started small, but the momentum built, and by the end
of a month things were extraordinary. James Leynse, a witness to the revival, wrote to his
Presbyterian supporters: “Hundreds of men and women confessed their sins and publicly
took a stand for Jesus Christ.”78 Yet in subsequent reports, those hundreds of people were
uniformly distilled into four: the chief of police who confessed to murder; an ex-official
who untangled himself from having two wives; a preacher who admitted he mishandled
funds; and an army officer who disclosed that he had taken a bribe.79 In such a version of
the story, the people of rank, wealth, and distinction were selected to be the standard
bearers of the revived Christian life.

Sung’s relationship to China’s elites was representative of a broader pattern in
revivalism. Revivals were regularly dependent upon what they attacked. An angry
revivalist, for example, could furiously excoriate a lukewarm church; yet, at the same
time, he needed to project a positive image of the renewed congregation. An itinerant
preacher could not fully demonize a church—not only for theological reasons, but also
because he was permanently dependent upon it for financial support and invitations to
preach. In a similar vein, Sung denounced the city’s bourgeoisie, rebuked them, and

78 James P. Leynse to Friends, Christmas 1932, Box 115, China Records Project Miscellaneous
Personal Papers Collection, Record Group No. 8, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library.

reviled them in his sermons, but—more often than not—he re-established their position as leaders in the community. Their ideals, after all, were the ones confirmed by revivalism’s Arminian theology and Sung’s vision of Christian morality. Yet even more immediate, Sung elevated China’s elites because he relied on their wealth, status, and power to maintain his image and further his interests.

Echoes of a Broader Discourse

Larger forces corroborated Sung’s vision of China’s entrepreneurs. The actions of the bourgeoisie certainly had faults, as the communists had been quick to point out, but the Nationalist government had somewhat reluctantly decided—like Sung—that bourgeois wealth and power was necessary for furthering its aims. Thus, Chiang Kai-shek had courted the nation’s elites as he tried to unite the country in 1927. In return, the bourgeoisie’s conservative vision of how to strengthen the nation was enshrined in government policy.

The bourgeoisie preferred a route to national independence and economic modernization that depended on conservative measures of incremental reform. That notion was formalized by the state with great fanfare in February 1934. One hundred

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81 Bergère, 227-228.
thousand people stood in drizzling rain to hear Chiang Kai-Shek call for a transformation of Chinese life through hygiene and behavioral adjustments. The country was in a state of acute crisis. “[O]rdinary processes of education and governance,” were not enough to rescue China from foreign encroachment and internal dissension. The nation needed complete “social regeneration.” It was time for a New Life Movement.

The New Life Movement expressed the dominant Nationalist ideology of the mid-1930s, and it had tremendous momentum by the time Sung arrived in Tianjin two months later. The first office of the movement had opened in Jiangxi province in March 1934, and by May eight other provinces had their own offices. Hebei province, where Sung was leading his meetings, organized its branch during the first week of his revival. The announcement came on the same day that Sung’s services were first publicized in the city papers. The newspaper article, which proclaimed the office’s opening, echoed the themes Chiang Kai-shek had outlined in earlier speeches: in order to become a modern

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83 Ibid., 2.


85 Ibid., 949.

86 “Xinshenghuo yundong juxing daibiao dahui [New Life Movement Holds Representative Meeting],” *Tianjin yongbao*, April 15, 1934; “Jidujiao budaotuan: qing Song Shangjie boshi jiangyan [Christian Evangeliste League Invites Dr. John Sung to Deliver Speeches],” *Tianjin yongbao*, April 15, 1934.
state, the “social customs and habits” of the Chinese people would need to be fundamentally changed.\(^\text{87}\)

Which customs, though, and what habits? It did not take long for lists to appear. In Tianjin, the New Life Movement promoted that people should learn to be clean and tidy, fast and dependable, physically fit, accepting of discipline, hard working, committed to wearing clothes manufactured domestically, eager to study when not on the job, and ready to sacrifice for the country.\(^\text{88}\) All worker protests over structural inequalities were deemed “selfish,” because they concerned the welfare of a person, a family, or a work unit.\(^\text{89}\) The masses needed to adjust themselves to the needs of the nation, and those needs were very clearly being defined by the aims of China’s economic elite.\(^\text{90}\)

The influence of China’s bourgeoisie over the direction of the New Life Movement can be seen in their shared concerns. Factory owners had been complaining that workers intentionally slowed production by secretly smearing oil on machine belts. Chiang Kai-shek made it a point in his *Outline of the New Life Movement* to address workers who tampered with equipment: those who had found a way to make factories produce less needed to change more.\(^\text{91}\) National strength depended on their reform.

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\(^{88}\) “Xinshenghuo yundong juxing daibiao dahui [New Life Movement Holds Representative Meeting],” *Tianjin yongbao*, April 15, 1934.

\(^{89}\) Dirlik, 958, Chiang Kai-shek, 1.

\(^{90}\) Dirlik, 957, 967, 977.

\(^{91}\) Chiang Kai-shek, 5.
The New Life Movement’s campaign against gambling, visiting brothels, smoking opium, being late, and drinking alcohol was also an echo of the longstanding concerns of China’s factory owners. In Tianjin, for example:

When a government investigator visited the Yu Yuan Mill in 1929, the management complained to him about several bad habits that impaired the efficiency of the workforce. Most of these habits (visiting brothels, gambling, taking liberties with women workers, stealing), were not directly related to the requirements of work time…

Still, the off-hour behaviors bothered the owners, and that was enough to mobilize the New Life Movement. The government identified these “habits” as unpatriotic vices, and therefore made the laborers who did them objects of reform. The hope of national progress, the New Life Movement insisted, was in the populace learning to conform to the aims of the elites.

In the mid-1930s, the bourgeoisie’s description of the path to national power was almost universally accepted in China’s cities, and the alternatives were criminalized. The Chinese Communist Party, the proponent of a rival ideology, was outlawed in 1927. The Guomindang (KMT) used repeated military strikes to contain the CCP, even if it could not entirely eliminate the threat. In a less conspicuous manner, non-productivity, though not an ideology, was also prohibited. Citizenship in China became coterminous with

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92 “Xinshenghuo yundong juxing daibiao dahui [New Life Movement Holds Representative Meeting],” Tianjin yongbao, April 15, 1934.

93 Hershatter, 163.

social productivity. Those who were not working were worse than useless: they were considered parasites on the nation. Thus the government implemented a formal penal system around issues of indigence and unemployment, and organized workhouses and poorhouses—homes that became “virtual prisons.”

Thus, viable alternatives to the emphases of the bourgeois New Life Movement were almost impossible to find. In that light, Sung’s own moral injunctions, which so clearly overlapped with those of factory owners and the New Life Movement, should not be taken to mean that he was a stooge of the bourgeoisie. His frequent denunciations of gambling, stealing, drinking, smoking opium, and visiting prostitutes were not a thinly disguised mask for state or bourgeois propaganda. They were clear-eyed instructions on how to navigate and succeed in Tianjin’s arrangement of social, economic, and political power in 1934.

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96 In a sample of 99 sermons, each of these sins easily falls within the top ten most cited by Sung, with gambling and stealing being tied for first, and visiting brothels coming in at number nine.
Without a doubt, Sung found that arrangement far more preferable than the communist alternative. Nonetheless, “The revival was not a capitalist plot.” Sung never intended to be a front for his wealthy patrons or the state’s New Life Movement,

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97 Sung’s political views have largely been hidden. One reason could be that his premillennial eschatology kept him from being too concerned or involved in China’s political affairs. This world and its arrangements of power were soon to pass away. Another factor, though, is the systematic avoidance of the issue by Song Tianzhen, John Sung’s daughter. Her publications on her father’s journals have been careful to avoid any mention of Sung’s political outlook. An unfettered examination of the material, however, reveals that while Sung did not dwell on politics, he clearly disliked the communists. In his journal, they always appeared in negative roles. For instance, on January 1, 1928, he wrote that the “Communist party is making a disturbance everywhere. At the end of the age, evildoers come forth in large number.” On December 8, 1930, when he was visiting Hangzhou, he recorded a dream in his diary wherein communists captured him and cut him with swords. His persecutors were people he knew from his hometown. Despite their efforts, he did not die. He was in great danger, though. Only the appearance of a heavenly army could finally rescue him. When he woke up, Sung concluded that communists were attacking his hometown, and that was why God had brought him to Hangzhou. Communists did not fare better in his sermons. They were invariably against him and the gospel. He even took to referring to them in popular slang as *gongfei*, “communist bandits.” Sung’s outlook was certainly not unique in the Christian community of the time. Only as fatigue set in over the interminable battles between the Nationalists and the Communists in 1934 did a few Christians attempt a rapprochement with the “red bandits.” The left-leaning Christian periodical, *The Chinese Recorder* tried to find some common ground between Christians and Communists. Most Christians, however, believed that no concord could exist between Christ and Belial, between Christianity and godless Communism. For more information on Sung’s opinion, or the perspective of other Christians toward Chinese communists, see: Song Shangjie, January 1, 1928, SSD, TTC; Song Shangjie, December 8, 1930, SSD, TTC; Song Shangjie, “Yesu zailai,” *Lingsheng* 2, no. 5 (May 1936): 16; *The Chinese Recorder* 64, no. 6 (1934); *The Bible for China* 70 (July-August 1934): 1-5; Fox Butterfield, “A Missionary View of the Chinese Communists (1936-1939),” in *American Missionaries in China*, edited by Kwang-Ching Liu (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 249-302.

even as their messages intertwined.\textsuperscript{99} Rather, the similarities of their refrains were an example of how his revivals were embedded in the bourgeois ideal of the proper life.

Sung and his audiences found that life attractive, and like almost everyone else in the city at that time, reached for its respectability.\textsuperscript{100}

\textbf{Revival and Class Composition}

Sung depended upon and enjoyed the backing of people from China’s bourgeoisie. That did not mean, however, that he was a chaplain to less than one percent of the population, China’s elites.\textsuperscript{101} On the contrary, few found their way to his meetings, leaving Sung to complain about the conspicuous absence of “merchants and tycoons” from his services. “Though the messages are good,” he lamented, “to them wealth is of

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\textsuperscript{99} If any evangelist can be accused of purposefully working for the state it would be Sherwood Eddy. Chiang Kai-shek, reportedly, endorsed Eddy’s coming to China to help work for moral reform. Eddy arrived in 1934 and led revival campaigns in Tianjin, Baoding, Beijing, Taiyuan, Kaifeng, Chengdu, Chongqing, Changsha, Hankow, Nanchang, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Amoy [Xiamen], Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Nanning. Sung accused Eddy of preaching a shallow moralism and, in places like Xiamen, tried to convince the people attending his services to boycott Eddy’s forthcoming revival. In response, Eddy wrote an open letter to John Sung at the end of December 1934, and had it published in \textit{The Chinese Recorder}, the preeminent Christian journal in the country. In it, Eddy pled his case: “I am a humble evangelist who believes and is trying to preach the whole gospel…. I believe that men are saved by the grace of God through Christ, who died for them, as they turn to Him in repentance and faith and that they are not saved by any merit of their own, or by the good works of any so-called ‘Social Gospel’. Such a ‘Social Gospel’ as a way of salvation or substitute for individual regeneration I never believed or preached.” Eddy went further and explained they were both doing the same things as they followed Jesus in “attacking social abuses as you and I both did the gross prostitution in Amoy, challenging the evils of selfish capitalism for its exploiting the labor of children, men and women for profit in industry, and the evil of corruption in political life where the poor are robbed and the country weakened by ‘squeeze’ and theft.” Sung never acknowledged Eddy’s appeal for peace. See: Thomson, 155; Jun Xing, \textit{Baptized in the Fire of Revolution: The American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China, 1919-1937} (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1996), 160; Sherwood Eddy, “My dear John Sung,” \textit{The Chinese Recorder} 66 (February 1935): 124-125.
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\textsuperscript{101} Lu, 63.
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greater importance.”102 His audiences were almost entirely drawn from a different social stratum.

Determining class in China is a complicated exercise. Post-revolutionary classifications of the population had a particular Marxist axe to grind and, therefore, have tended to shoehorn people into predetermined categories. “Official ideology,” as Hanchao Lu has explained, “needed to forge an image, however distorted, of a unified proletariat as the leading class of revolution.”103 He added that the “Communists’ labeling…of social class was purely for the purpose of orchestrating political campaigns, and in no way reflected objective reality.”104 For that reason, this study will avoid using the language of the proletariat. It is an unhelpful designation in Chinese studies, and does not deepen the analysis of those who attended Sung’s services. Instead, I will follow the work of Gail Hershatter and Hanchao Lu, who—in different ways—fleshed out China’s urban class structure. Beneath the bourgeoisie, they identified two groups: the underclass, and the xiaoshimin. Each group will be examined to see which class or classes came to Sung’s meetings.

The Underclass

People in the underclass were somewhat of an amorphous group, defined less by what they had or did, and more by what they lacked. It was the class of the destitute.

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102 Song Shangjie, *Forty Sermons by John Sung*, vol. 2 (Singapore: Alice Doo, 1983), 41.
103 Lu, 63.
104 Ibid., 167.
They were most easily recognized by their homes, or—in extreme cases—lack thereof. The urban underclass largely lived in *wopu*, either huts built with scavenged wood and then filled in with mud and grass, or lean-tos made of reed mats. Even so, *wopu* had landlords who collected rents from the squatters on their property.\textsuperscript{105} Collectors came daily, not monthly, and evicted anyone who fell behind five days in their payments.\textsuperscript{106} Most people of the underclass had no regular work; only a tiny portion found a way to earn a few coppers by making toilet paper out of grass, for instance. Many resorted to begging and scavenging. What elicited the most comment, however, “was that so many able-bodied people stayed home.”\textsuperscript{107} Gail Hershatter captured the hopelessness of the underclass in a newspaper report filed in 1935:

In another small room, we found two strong young men lying on a special bed which had bricks spread on the four sides and straw spread out in the middle. One saw us and sat up, and looked at us with a glazed stare. We asked why he didn’t go out to work, and he said, “Where is there work?” He sighed, then said, “We want to work but there isn’t any. When we beg no one will give because we are young. There’s no way out but to starve to death!” When he finished talking he lay down again.\textsuperscript{108}

To slip into the city’s underclass was often to begin a slow slide toward death. In one shantytown, an investigator visited 1,400 homes and found at least one sick person in each. No one could afford medical care.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{105} Lu, 123.  
\textsuperscript{106} Hershatter, 79.  
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 78.  
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 78-79, quoted from *Yishi bao*, January 20, 1935, 9.  
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 80.
The size of the underclass ballooned in the 1930s as the worldwide depression suffocated China’s urban economy. The national figures for the number of men without work leapt from 16.2 percent in 1928 to 40 percent in 1933. This enormous group of déclassé workers probably comprised the largest portion of Tianjin’s underclass. Immigrants and refugees were a second demographic that regularly resupplied the ranks of the desperately poor. Scholars have noted a third segment of the city’s population that was particularly vulnerable to falling into the underclass: women. A study conducted by the Tianjin city government found that many of the destitute were cast off concubines, child brides abused by their mother-in-laws, prostitutes treated cruelly by brothel owners, or servants living in intolerable conditions. The fourth segment of the underclass was the physically disabled. A few of the handicapped found paths out of the poverty through fortune telling or as musicians. Most, however, were consigned to the economic desperation endemic to the city’s poorest. In a survey conducted in 1929-1930, the number of people who had no income, or whose income could not support a household, was more than 95,000—making the underclass a little more than ten percent of the population. Soon thereafter the impact of the worldwide depression pushed the number of those not working in Tianjin to the astronomical figure of 742,076. It is fair to guess

\[110\] Ibid., 76.


\[112\] Hershatter, 45. It needs to be noted now, and it will be reinforced in the chapter, that unemployment was not synonymous with being part of the underclass. Exact percentages, therefore, for the size of Tianjin’s underclass in 1934 is impossible to determine. I suspect it ran as high as twenty percent.
that when Sung arrived at the height of the economic crisis, the city had a very sizable underclass.

This considerable segment of the population, however, was not the class of people Sung attracted to his revivals. No doubt some may have slipped in, but the evidence suggests that the desperately poor were scarcely part of his ministry. Christian outreach to the underclass was not built around revival meetings. The Salvation Army, which arrived in China in 1916, quickly established itself as a leading provider for the poor. Its distinctive evangelistic style of marching bands, parades, and open-air meetings, was supplemented with more traditional relief methods, and the introduction of the “beggar colony”—a place where the “flotsam and jetsam” could be turned into productive workers for the nation.  

Both government and charitable organizations adopted the Salvationist’s technique of reforming the poor, so that by 1934 most work among the underclass in Tianjin was performed in relief or aid centers, such as those operated by the ABCFM, and not in the church. In fact, Christian outreach to the poorest of China was considered to be such a unique ministry that a survey of the “Evangelistic Work in China To-day,” declared, “The well known and important work of the Salvation Army is not included because it was not considered to come within the scope of the enquiry.”

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113 Chen, 71.


Evangelism aimed at China’s underclass in the 1930s simply took a form other than 
Sung’s itinerant revival campaigns.

Extant records confirm that Sung almost never addressed the underclass. In his 
moral injunctions, the parts of his sermons where Sung translated his message into 
specific behaviors, he consistently overlooked the grim reality that the desperately poor 
faced. He warned his audiences to avoid going to movies, attending plays, reading 
novels, and visiting prostitutes. Yet as Gail Hershatter observed, no amusement halls or 
brothels existed in Tianjin’s districts of the underclass. As one reporter had it, “[T]hese 
people have no money for bad habits.” Sung was either blind to the economic plight of 
the people who sat before him, or his sermons were directed to an entirely different 
audience. One is inclined to believe the latter, since hundreds of people in Tianjin 
repented in tears when they heard his injunctions against such indulgences as attending 
picnics. Sung was obviously not curbing the behaviors of the destitute, who frequently 
had nothing to eat. Instead he was challenging a class of people who had enough means 
that they could confess to him in private that they smoked, purchased pornographic 
materials, went to shows, visited prostitutes, had a husband who could keep a second 
wife, and the like. Even those who came to Sung unemployed, like the comprador 
Zhao Guicui who had recently lost his job, could not be classified with the underclass.

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116 Hershatter, 80; quoted from *Tianjin shi zhoukan*, 1, no. 7, 13.
118 Song Shangjie, April 11-27, 1934, SSD, TTC.
For, as he explained to Sung, after he lost his job at Butterfield and Swire he was able to secure a temporary loan from his cousin for twenty-five yuan.\textsuperscript{119} It was not a fortune, but the money was more than the average monthly salary of most working class families.\textsuperscript{120} The extra cash, along with the connections his former job would have supplied Zhao, prevented him from careening into Tianjin’s underclass. He, along with the vast majority of Sung’s audience, was part of a different social level.

The Xiaoshimin

If the people who came to hear Sung preach were by-and-large not the entrepreneurs, modern professionals, or cultural elites that comprised the bourgeoisie, nor the urban underclass whose measure of success was surviving one more day, then Sung’s audience would be catalogued among the “city’s ciphers and nonentities”—that class of people popularly known as the xiaoshimin, or petty urbanites.\textsuperscript{121} According to Hanchao Lu, everyone in Republican China used the word and knew what it meant, but nowhere in Chinese sources is the term adequately analyzed or carefully defined. “It was less clear who should be included in the category than who should be excluded,” Hanchao Lu determined after examining the use of the label in Shanghai. “The elite at the top and the urban poor at the bottom would never be referred to as xiaoshimin. It was the people who stood in between who were called ‘petty urbanites.’”\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{119} Song Shangjie, April 14, 1934, SSD, TTC.
\textsuperscript{120} Sheehan, \textit{Trust in Troubled Times}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{121} Lu, 3.
\textsuperscript{122} Lu, 61.
To think of the *xiaoshimin* as middle class, however, would be misleading. For one thing, the frequent use of the term in contemporary discourse leaves it as vague and unhelpful as *xiaoshimin*. In addition, popular stereotypes about the middle class interfere with historical accuracy. It may be easier to think in terms of historical analogies. The *Kleinbürger* of early modern Germany share many parallels with the *xiaoshimin*. Most significantly, both groups were “socially and economically as distinct from the capitalist bourgeoisie as they were from the propertyless proletariat.” The *Kleinbürger* were also predominantly shopkeepers, petty traders, and minor officeholders. If the analogy is helpful, then one could adopt Christopher Friedrichs’s translation of *Kleinbürger* for the *xiaoshimin*: lower-middle class.123

Who fell into that class? Most scholars have chosen to focus on occupations. Perry Link, for instance, argued that *xiaoshimin* was a term “taken to include small merchants, various kinds of clerks and secretaries, high school students, housewives, and other modestly educated, marginally well off urbanites.”124 Others have remarked on the *xiaoshimin* as office workers, clerks, all types of white-collar workers, and shop assistants. Such people would be found working in banking and finance, transportation, the municipal government, factory offices, post offices, department stores, hardware stores, Western pharmacies, and foreign firms. They could also be enrolled in schools and


collectes.\textsuperscript{125} Collectively, they accounted for approximately one-fifth of Tianjin’s population in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{126}

An alternative way of assessing the \textit{xiaoshimin} is to shift the focus from occupation to location. Where did they live? Hanchao Lu argued that the appellation itself pointed in this direction. The \textit{xiaoshimin} were petty urbanites. He, therefore, carefully studied settlement patterns in Shanghai. His conclusions expanded the definition of China’s lower-middle class. Not only were office workers, clerks, and shop assistants found living together, but also factory workers who had relatively stable employment. In fact, most industrial workers were able to avoid living in \textit{wopu} and the shantytowns of the underclass.\textsuperscript{127} That meant that in a short Shanghai alleyway, a Maritime Customs officer, a tailor, two young waitresses at an amusement center or nightclub, workers in a rayon factory, and a mistress for a banker were all found together. It was, in Lu’s assessment, a snapshot of China’s \textit{xiaoshimin}.\textsuperscript{128} The picture is also consistent with the professions Sung described his audience members having in his sermons, the type of employment people listed when they joined one of Sung’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[125] Lu, 63.
\item[126] Hershatter, 45.
\item[127] Lu, 64, 131.
\item[128] Ibid., 173-175.
\end{footnotes}
evangelistic teams, and the occupations Sung penned in his journals of those who came to him privately to confess sins, to seek healing, or to ask for his guidance and prayers.\textsuperscript{129}

It is important to emphasize, however, that to have work was not the same as being a petty urbanite. A finer, and important distinction can be made among those people living between the extremely rich and the most desperately poor. Gail Hershatter has written of a working class that was differentiated from the \textit{xiaoshimin}, and it is a concept adopted in this study. In her research, Hershatter demonstrated that in Tianjin employment did not translate into \textit{xiaoshimin} status. At least 16\% of the city in 1938 was involved in low class occupations. Whereas the \textit{xiaoshimin} gravitated to commercial and clerical jobs, the working class held posts in industry, handicraft, and transport.\textsuperscript{130} Those working class positions were too tenuous and low paying to allow someone to live among the \textit{xiaoshimin}, or to be ranked as part of that more respectable petty urbanite class.

Two other important factors separated the \textit{xiaoshimin} from the working class. Yeh Wen-hsin has argued that despite the wide variety of employment that the \textit{xiaoshimin}

\textsuperscript{129} See, for example, Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol. 1, 70; Cai Jianyuan, ed., \textit{Zhonghua quanguo jidutu budaotuan huananqu chajingdahui baogaoshu} [The National Evangelistic Association Southern Division Bible Study Meeting Report] (Fuzhou: Fujian: Shiming Shuguan 1937); Song Shangjie, ed., \textit{Quanguo jidutu budaotuan tuankan} [National Chinese Evangelistic Leaguue Publication] (December 1936); Song Shangjie, April 16-18, 1934, SSD, TTC. The snapshot of those who joined an evangelistic team is not necessarily identical to those who attended Sung’s services, but insofar as the two groups overlapped extensively, the occupations listed by people who joined teams provides the best data available on Sung’s audiences. In 1936, 40\% of the team members were involved in education, either as teachers, administrators, or students. Thirty-one percent were involved in Christian ministry. Twelve percent of the evangelistic team members came from the medical profession; eight percent from business; five percent were home makers; and three percent were government employees.

\textsuperscript{130} Hershatter, 43-45.
could hold, what bound them together as a social unit was literacy.\textsuperscript{131} A significant
number of the working class, whose lives Hershatter so carefully catalogued, simply did
not qualify.\textsuperscript{132} Even those in the working class who could read did not get a free pass into
the lower-middle class, because another non-negotiable feature of the \textit{xiaoshimin} was
their access to leisure.\textsuperscript{133} The majority of Tianjin’s industry was small-scale, where
“owners and a small number of employees labored side by side. No clear distinction was
made between work and leisure.”\textsuperscript{134} They worked, ate, and slept together with the
singular aim of doing the same again tomorrow.

The \textit{xiaoshimin}, on the other hand, worked in large factories, western-owned
companies, banks, and schools where on-hours and off-hours were created. This was a
class that had defined working days and working hours, and therefore designated hours
for leisure as well. Passing time became an important element in their lives.\textsuperscript{135} Thus, the
\textit{xiaoshimin} became:

the faces in the crowds at amusement halls, teahouses, pleasure quarters,
and on streets lined with shops. For diversion they read newspapers and
listened to radio programs. Their taste sustained the circulation of trashy
novels and comic strips supplied by backstreet sidewalk vendors. The
bachelors among them were likely to enjoy a little drinking and gambling,

\textsuperscript{131} Yeh Wen-hsin, \textit{Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China,
1843-1949} (Berkeley: University of California, Press, 2007), 102.

\textsuperscript{132} Hershatter, 101, noted that workers tended to sign their contracts with a thumbprint.

\textsuperscript{133} Chen, 48; A study of rickshaw pullers, a class universally recognized as “low class,” discovered
that half were literate.

\textsuperscript{134} Hershatter, 82, 84.

\textsuperscript{135} Link, 197.
whiling away their spare time in the company of neighbors and coworkers.\textsuperscript{136}

Like their occupations and living quarters, literacy and leisure were important factors in defining the \textit{xiaoshimin}.

Among those in the middle, therefore, it was not the working class, but this literate and leisured group—the \textit{xiaoshimin}—to whom Sung primarily appealed. To move lower on the social scale was to preach to an illiterate class of people who could not follow his instructions to read the Bible daily, or who would be unable to enjoy the messages he penned on the photos, Bibles, and other memorabilia that they handed to him.\textsuperscript{137} Far more significantly, though, to go lower was to bump against the inflexible working class schedule. Most of the working class had little freedom or time to attend his services, either in the afternoon or evening.\textsuperscript{138} For all intents and purposes, Sung’s ministry was restricted to Tianjin’s \textit{xiaoshimin}, an odd blend of an aspiring capitalist class and a nascent working class, neither of which had fully formed or broken with the other.

\textsuperscript{136} Yeh, 102-103.


\textsuperscript{138} “Jidjiao budaotuan qing Song Shangjie boshi jiangyan [Christian Evangelistic League has Invited Song Shangjie to Speak], \textit{Tianjin dagong bao}, April 15, 1934. In some cities, Sung held morning and mid-morning services as well. The same logic, however, still applies. For those without modern times of leisure, it would be almost impossible to attend his meetings.
**Why the Xiaoshimin?**

Petty Urbanite Anxieties

Sung unmasked the thinly disguised ambivalence about the city that circulated amongst the *xiaoshimin*. He did this by expressing their deep anxieties about their new urban homes. It was common enough for city-dwellers to extol the virtues of the city. A popular saying had it that “having explored up to the edge of the world, one could not find a better place than the two sides of the Huangpu River [Shanghai].” Another insisted that it was “a great fortune for a person to live in this colorful and dazzling world [of the city].” Immigrants flocked to China’s urban centers by the hundreds of thousands. Tianjin more than tripled in size from 320,000 inhabitants in 1900 to 1,385,137 by 1929. While China’s northern interior was devastated by famine, flooding, banditry, warring generals, marauding soldiers, and rioting peasants, Tianjin held out the possibility of new jobs and opportunities, as well as social advancement, all in the midst of:

- carefully constructed space with tree-lined boulevards, public parks, private gardens, neon lights, glittering shop fronts, bustling entertainment quarters, towering office buildings, and so forth. [The city’s] inhabitants had access to various forms of modern culture: theaters, cinemas, concerts, sports, bookstores, publishing houses, newspapers, schools, and so on. It was also a more secure life because of the availability of doctors, hospitals, policemen, fire fighters, welfare agencies, and benevolent societies.

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139 Lu, 48.


141 Yeh, 119.
For newly arriving peasants, the great disparity between urban and rural incomes meant that to do menial work for an inconsistent and absurdly low wage, such as pulling a rickshaw in Tianjin, could still mean bettering their livelihood. Even the most desperately poor praised China’s modern cities, it was reported, because when they “begged in the city you could get meat or fish soup. In the village all one could hope for was cornmeal.” The appeal of the city was powerful. It offered a new ladder for success, the attraction of building a new China, the fascination of a new and complex environment, the glamour of associating with the new style, and so on. By all appearances, the xiaoshimin were among the lucky few who were able to live in a city.

Beneath the surface, however, a real uncertainty about modern urban life left the xiaoshimin unsettled and anxious. True, as a group they were financially better off than their rural kin or the underclass, but in fact the xiaoshimin could claim little of the city’s abundance. Perry Link observed that urban living was of a cruel tease for the xiaoshimin: “Something as simple as window-shopping could give urban residents hundreds of ownership aspirations which would never have arisen in the hinterland but which few [petty urbanites], in fact, could achieve in the city.” Disappointment abounded, frustration mounted, and stories exploited the contradictions.

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143 Lao She, *Luotou Xiangzi* [*Camel Xiangzi*] (Hong Kong: Xuelin youxian gongsi, n.d.), quoted in Lu, 6.

144 Link, 228.

145 Link, 20.
A series of vignettes, for instance, were published between October 30, 1931 and December 3, 1931 in the popular periodical *Shen bao* about an old man who came to Shanghai from the village for a visit. The likable old peasant began his adventure in the city by misunderstanding the sign at the train station by taking it literally. He wanted a “moon deck ticket” [yuetai piao], and was disappointed that it was only a “platform ticket.” Outside the station, he was disabused of the idea that someone could help him find the home of his relative. After fruitless inquiries of the people passing by, it slowly dawned on him that nobody in the city knew anyone else. When he wanted to board the streetcar, he discovered it had a first and third class, but no second class. What nonsense! And the irrationality of the city was only beginning.

When he strolled down the boulevards, he could not help but notice that whole rows of businesses were all selling the exact same things. His attempt to help two neighboring shop owners by recommending that they go into business together was met with incredulity and charges that he was crazy. Before he left, the visitor was exposed to such insanities as flesh colored stockings, sex appeal in movies, and the aggressiveness of prostitutes. The old man hurried home to his village. Rumors had spoken of the city with suspicion, but now that he had been there himself, he knew the deeper truth. China’s urban centers were deeply depraved.\(^{146}\)

\(^{146}\) Link, 225-227; Link provides a helpful summary and makes helpful suggestions as to how the story functioned.
On the one hand, of course, the old man was comic. Readers could laugh at his misadventures. The humor was based “on his misunderstanding of things which the reader understands, and therefore allows the reader the comfort of feeling superior.”\textsuperscript{147} On the other hand, the humor depended on the peasant’s criticisms actually hitting home. In fact, the story is funny precisely because the old man’s view of the world made so much sense. Beneath the apparently light-hearted jabs at the hapless country bumpkin, such popular fiction hid a rather stinging critique of the absurdities associated with China’s urban lifestyle. Certainly not everything was well in the nation’s new capitals of commerce, wealth, and promise, and the \textit{xiaoshimin} knew it.

For one thing, poverty always seemed to be nipping at the \textit{xiaoshimin}’s heels. Tianjin’s economy was notoriously unstable; it went through nine financial crises between 1916 and 1937.\textsuperscript{148} With each economic collapse some of the surplus workers would go back to their villages, but new faces in the city quickly replaced them. The population would swell and contract, swell and contract, like a pulsating heart. Yet after each crisis it seemed the city swelled more and contracted less, creating an abundance of excess labor. New immigrants swamped the economy. In several professions 93\% of the workers were immigrants to Tianjin, not native sons or daughters.\textsuperscript{149} In some occupations, the majority of employees had held their positions for three years or less.\textsuperscript{150}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{147} Link, 228.
\textsuperscript{148} Sheehan, 3.
\textsuperscript{149} Hershatter, 49.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 49, 58.
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The “massive reserve army of labor,” as Gail Hershatter noted, “no doubt helped to keep wages low, and also to shape an occupational structure in which few people had steady jobs.” Job insecurity did not affect each profession evenly, and the xiaoshimin, whose education made them less interchangeable than employees in some other lines of work, probably fared better than most. Nonetheless, their positions in large factories, banks, department stores, and the like were not immune from Tianjin’s erratic economic fortunes. Indeed, having achieved a modicum of the security that would always remain beyond the reach of the working- and underclass, the xiaoshimin may have been especially anxious not to forfeit it. Perhaps for that reason, they turned to any number of schemes to bilk their employers for a little extra buffer-money. The petty urbanites may have escaped interminable poverty, but fears about their financial viability dogged them constantly.

Another feature endemic to life in Tianjin was violence. With jobs tenuous, workers became extremely protective. Although the transport trade was characterized by more violence than most occupations, a closer look at this working class profession puts

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151 Ibid., 76.

152 See, for example, Song Shangjie, April 16-17, 1934, SSD, TTC. Many people who approached Sung to make a private confession admitted to stealing money from their work, family, or friends. The offense should not blind us to two important realities. First, it is an important clue about class. The fact that these people stole money and not things is indicative of their lower-middle class status. To go much below the xiaoshimin would be to interact with a class of people who had a few things, but virtually no money. Second, those who attended Sung’s meetings apparently felt vulnerable and needed to access cash in unconventional ways (i.e., theft). In this, they were not alone. According to Wakeman, 79, crime and theft became virtually synonymous in the 1930s. In Beiping, just a little north of Tianjin, for instance, eighty percent of felonies were theft-related.
in high relief the ferocity with which people commonly dealt with rivals. Gail Hershatter described it thus:

Life in the transport trade was imbued with violence. Indeed, the boundaries of a transport worker’s guild were literally defined by violence, for although each guild had its inherited territory, sanctioned by government decree, infractions were frequent. A guild member caught poaching on another’s territory had to confess his mistake, and his boss had to apologize as well, or bloodshed would ensue.153

Newspaper articles from the time indicated apologies were few, because bloodshed was all too common. Headlines focused on the numerous fights in the streets with knives and axes between warring transport workers. Just as common, though, were stories of workers storming boats and thrashing captains for not knowing about, or not paying the so-called “unloading fee.” Other fairly common news items included reports of workers who raided factories and beat up employees and smashed equipment when they became unhappy with the arrangement they had in moving the factory’s goods.154 Violence, by 1933, was so ubiquitous in China’s cities that a survey of the nation’s urban hospitals discovered that violence was the second most common cause for medical care, accounting for almost 11% of all patients.155

Violence could ensue unexpectedly. A worker might suddenly stab his boss for not paying fairly, or if someone was caught sneaking into a movie theater without a ticket a

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153 Hershatter, 131.
154 Ibid., 132ff.
fight was likely to follow.\textsuperscript{156} It became an important survival strategy, therefore, to create associations of mutual protection. These were usually built around blood or native-place ties, though they were not limited to them. Those wanting more substantial protection affiliated with one of the gangs active in Tianjin, either the \textit{Qing bang} [Green Gang] or the \textit{Hong bang} [Red Gang]. Both organizations provided vertical alliances that ran through every social stratum of the city.\textsuperscript{157} Such connections did not guarantee safety, but they did provide a level of security. Sung waged a verbal battle against fighting and joining gangs by denouncing them as sin. But in a city that was gripped as much by anomie, as by violence, few could dare to heed his call for repentance.\textsuperscript{158}

A third urban reality that belied the gilded image of life in the city was the prevalence of disease and sickness. Sanitation was a problem. Although the concession areas had running water and sewage, the rest of Tianjin did not. This was a troublesome health issue as human and factory waste were dumped onto the street. In one neighborhood the refuse formed a “greenish current more than one foot deep.”\textsuperscript{159} Escaping the pollution was difficult. Whereas a few of the cotton mills provided bathhouses for their workers, most did not. That translated into Tianjin’s higher paid workers visiting a public bathhouse two or three times in a month; those with lower

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{156} Hershatter, 131-135.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 169-171.
\item \textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 181. In Sung’s sermons, fighting and joining gangs are regularly named as sins. His journal from Tianjin, though, mentioned not one person who confessed to such sins.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 74.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
wages did not bathe at all, but rinsed themselves in the river during the summer and with damp towels in the winter. Inadequate facilities for public and personal hygiene ended up combining with the harsh climate and a generally poor urban diet to create a sick city. In January, people were afflicted with tuberculosis and other respiratory problems; in February it tended to be fevers and rashes; in March and April tuberculosis and typhoid would make the rounds; in May, June, and July fevers and rashes were frequently reported; in August and September tuberculosis, diarrhea, and digestive orders were most common; and then from October through December tuberculosis dominated once again. The xiaoshimin were not immune to these physical disorders.

Perry Link first suggested that tuberculosis must have been a common ailment among the petty urbanites, because of the number of heroes and heroines in popular literature that were brought low by the disease. He argued that the fictitious sick characters served to tell readers they should not despair if they got sick. All heroes had to suffer after all; it was part of the urban narrative. Link’s suspicions now seem to be confirmed by the xiaoshimin who came to Sung for healing in Tianjin. Near the end of his campaign thirty-nine women visited him when he was at Zhang Zhouxin’s home, specifically for healing. Sung dutifully recorded the name of each woman, and her

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160 Ibid., 73.

health complaint. More than twenty percent asked to be healed of tuberculosis (or in one case, of spitting blood). Almost as many women had issues with abdominal pain. Other complaints included heart problems and strokes, headaches, inflamed kidneys, swollen hands and feet, and diseases of the eyes. The city was “ridden with disease.” For the xiaoshimin, to avoid urban poverty was not to escape the city’s illnesses.

The fourth thing that constantly threatened to suck all savor out of urban life for the xiaoshimin was boredom. Many petty urbanites held enviable jobs as clerks in places like the Ministry of Communication (railroads), Maritime Customs Service, or banks. Popular slang reverenced such jobs for their relative security and wages, labeling them as an “iron rice bowl,” “silver bowl,” and “golden bowl,” respectively. Yet despite the popular image, many clerks bemoaned the tedium of their jobs. In order to improve efficiency and quality, modern institutions concentrated decision-making power at the top echelon of the organization, while narrowing the assignments of general employees. Clerks were largely reduced to singular tasks repeated with mind-numbing regularity.

In the Bank of China, leadership addressed an employee complaint about the boredom of dealing with telegrams for ten years, by issuing a general announcement that workers should strive to be “anonymous heroes,” and that the business was not so much a family as it was a piece of equipment. The clerk was admonished to be content in his role

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162 Song Shangjie, April 28, 1934, SSD, TTC.
163 Hershatter, 74.
164 Yeh, 93.
as “‘a cog in this complex machine.’”

Apparently, the rebuttal did not suffice, because management eventually added “boredom” as an issue to be addressed in the official training book of the bank. Boredom was a widespread personnel problem that was sabotaging morale. Wen-hsin Yeh believed it was an indication of a deeper malaise that was sparked by a “loss of control…and the diminishing relevance of individuals.” The xiaoshimin generally struggled as their lives were slowly drained of meaning.

Financial insecurity, violence, sickness, and boredom were all intensified as the Tianjin economy bottomed out in 1934. The economic situation in the city was always volatile, but by 1930 analysts noted that the city had gone from a chronic to an acute crisis, as the largest industry—cotton mills—began to lose 27 yuan on every bale of yarn they sold. The situation deteriorated over the following years as a series of global forces pounded the city. First, the worldwide depression shrunk the demand for Chinese products. Then in 1933, when the United States went off the gold standard, Tianjin experienced a bank run that marked the beginning of a three-year depression. Shortly thereafter, the Chinese government revised its tariffs in such a way that the duty on imported cotton was reduced, even as taxes rose on the raw cotton and textile machinery

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166 Yeh, 93.
167 Ibid., 94.
168 Hershatter, 35.
169 From 1929 to 1934, Chinese exports were cut almost in half. See: Bergère, 77.
170 Sheehan, 163.
needed by Chinese manufacturers. Meanwhile, Japanese mills, which were better capitalized than their Chinese counterparts, exploited the situation and began to dump their goods at artificially low prices to eliminate their Chinese competition.\textsuperscript{171} All of these factors meant that, “By 1934 most of Tianjin mills were near collapse,”\textsuperscript{172} and by extension, the whole city was teetering uncertainly.

The city’s bourgeoisie, for sure, took heavy losses, but they were the few who could stand to lose something, and still have a remainder. The underclass, somewhat counter-intuitively, would have experienced the least change to their lives. Grinding poverty is terribly boring. It looks the same whether a city is thriving or imploding. The impact on the \textit{xiaoshimin}, though, was intense. They were the ones who felt like everything they had was threatened, as indeed it was. Trapped on a sinking ship over which they had no control, the petty urbanites could only hope for a way to escape.

\textbf{A Safe Home}

In the midst of this massive urban crisis, Sung diverted \textit{xiaoshimin} anxiety about their situation by constructing an idealized image of their rural homes. That message held visceral appeal since it was pronounced in a city where something like four-fifths of the inhabitants had been born elsewhere.\textsuperscript{173} Sung’s audience had memories of and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{171} Hershatter, 35-36.
\item \textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 36.
\item \textsuperscript{173} Bergère, 100.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
connections to rural China. He capitalized on those living links in his sermons by calling up images of their former lives, albeit in an indirect and sanitized form.

In Sung’s sermons the countryside became the place of righteousness. In the story of Abram and Lot, Abram had the better portion (Gen 13:10-18). On the surface, of course, Lot appeared to enjoy the better life. After immigrating to the city of Sodom, he “made his pile [of money]…by opening many business houses—Lot trading Co., Lot Groceries, Lot Travel Service, Lot Banking Corporation.” His daughters were “society birds,” and everything seemed to fall his way. Even when he faced unpleasantness, like when he was captured by marauding kings and dragged away from the city, Lot remained unshaken in his confidence in urban living, for when Abram rescued him, he quickly scampered back to the place of promise, glamour, and wealth. As it turned out, Lot was like a dog returning to its vomit. For, Sung reminded his listeners, Sodom was ultimately destroyed by the wrath of God. Abram, on the other hand, always “remained in the village, away from the world.” He kept his distance from urban contamination, because it was only when he was in rural areas that “He praised God all day.” This symbolic sanctification of the countryside surfaced repeatedly. Sung depicted Nicodemus, for example, as the urbanite who looked down on Jesus—the man from the hinterlands. Or in another sermon, he paused to point out that Jesus healed a blind man

174 Hershatter, 45.
175 Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 1, 81.
176 Song, Fenxingji [Devotional Messages], 168.
177 Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 1, 81.
only after leading him outside the city (Mark 8:22-26). “From this we can see that flourishing cities will impede people on the road of salvation. Today, we also need to leave the cities and go to the villages. Only then will we see the Lord’s glory.”¹⁷⁸

Whereas the village became a primary symbol of purity for Sung, the city was the womb of evil. Nothing good could come from it. Even infants “immediately perceive that it is bitter, and so open their mouths and cry.”¹⁷⁹ Biblical cities in his sermons were nothing more than stand-ins for Tianjin, Shanghai, Xiamen, or whatever urban center he happened to be preaching in. Just as Corinth was a prosperous but adulterous city, so also were the cities in which Sung proclaimed the word of God. “Jericho,” he would warn his readers when expositing Joshua 6, “is a type of the world to be destroyed. This glittering [city] will be destroyed one day.”¹⁸⁰ The whole world, in fact, would melt by fire.¹⁸¹

Or would it? Certainly literalism prompted him to affirm with 2 Peter 3:10-12 the fiery end of the whole world. However, Sung’s symbolic representations of the city and countryside complicated matters. Ultimately, he sided with the words of Jesus. On the Day of Judgment, believers should flee from China’s cities and hide in the mountains or in the wilderness (Matthew 24:16).¹⁸² China’s cities were invariably bad, whereas the


nation’s interior was repeatedly depicted as a sanctuary from the corruptions of the modern world. Sung spoke of a safe place to the *xiaoshimin* who were in the midst of real insecurity.

Audiences apparently lapped up this dichotomous and fictionalized depiction of urban and rural China. It did at least three things. For one, it provided the *xiaoshimin* comfort. It was a reminder that rural China was still there. “It existed before the modern city did, and still in a sense lay beneath it—almost ontologically prior,” as Perry Link expressed it. “A person could rise and fall and be hurtled about in the city, and the city itself might entirely collapse, but the countryside would always be there. One could count on it.”¹⁸³ That did not mean Sung’s converts abandoned the city, and moved back to their birthplaces in droves. They did not. They all knew that his idyllic picture of the places from which they had just come was illusory. To leave the city would be an extraordinary loss. Even Sung knew it. When he was not excoriating China’s cities, he could admit, and be humbled by, the sacrifice of the handful of people he knew who actually left them in order to preach in China’s hinterlands.¹⁸⁴ No one really planned to depart the city. Sung’s elevation of village life was more like “‘sweet grapes’… the romanticizing of an alternative one knew was secure.”¹⁸⁵ Unsettled circumstances in urban China could not deny the *xiaoshimin* the comfort of a backup plan. Poverty, illness, violence, and

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¹⁸³ Link, 202.


¹⁸⁵ Link, 229.
boredom did not have the last word. If life in the city truly fell apart, then at least they could make a trip back to a rural place, which, Sung colluded in pretending with his audience, was not so bad after all.

Second, Sung’s sermons provided a satisfying resolution to the xiaoshimin’s conundrum. Virtually none of them wanted to return to their rural lives, but almost all of them were disappointed with the urban cesspool. Where were they to go? Sung offered them an alternative “home.” He did this by inviting them to identify with a new hometown, one in heaven rather than in any village or city. Time after time, he would end his services by inviting people to, “huijia ba! [Return home!]” To repent of one’s sins, to turn to God, was the surest way to go home, to find the place Sung had been romanticizing. “Is the world our home?” Sung probed his urban audiences who struggled with anxiety, uncertainty, and fear. “Don’t make a mistake. This world is a wilderness. Our home is in heaven! Everyone come back home!” He seldom depicted that heavenly home in terms of wealth, health, or abundance. Far more often, it was simply the place where a person could truly belong. If his immigrant listeners would become a part of “the Father’s hometown,” then they would be God’s sons and daughters. “No one will be separated by the surnames Wang, Chen, or Huang. We will all be one family,

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186 See, for example: Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 3.
187 Song, Fenxingji, 3.
188 Ibid., 187.
living together and never, ever leaving one another.” All partings, those risky departures from home in search of a better life, would cease. God the Father would be the stolid patriarch who held the new family together, whereas Jesus fulfilled the role of the mother. It fell to God the Son to weep over sinners, cuddle the brokenhearted, and coo with delight over his baobei [precious babies or darlings]. Together the Father and the Son offered an idealized picture of the family, “a beautiful heavenly home.” Many in Sung’s audiences found it difficult to resist, therefore, when he asked them, “Do you want to go home? Raise your hands if you want [to]! I’m the first!”

Finally, Sung’s contrast between the city and the countryside gave the xiaoshimin an honorable way to maintain their rural values. Perry Link has argued that petty urbanites felt pressured to act modern. Caught between the media-driven urban ideal, and the reluctance to abandon rural norms, many xiaoshimin adopted “stylishness”:

Without necessarily accepting a new-style idea completely, one could pretend one did, or say so to others, or read a novel which—at least on the surface—proclaimed the new style, and in doing such things enjoy the comfort which comes from seeming to support goals which are lauded in public. Following from this association, new-style things took on a character which, for its superficiality and its transience, can only be called stylishness.

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189 Song, *Moshide jidutu dang zhuyide er da wenti* [Two Important Issues End-Time Christians Should be Aware Of], 47.

190 Song, *Fenxingji*, 3-4.

191 Song, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 140.

192 Link, 203.
On the one hand, Chinese urban stylishness—the learning of a few words in English, carrying a fountain pen, watching a movie about new-style dating, or even experimenting with such romantic attachments—allowed the xiaoshimin to appear urban and modern. On the other hand, Perry Link concluded, for all the promotion such behavior received by the media, xiaoshimin stylishness remained superficial. “At a deeper level, traditional values were still dear to their hearts.” In their eagerness to appear urbane, the xiaoshimin acted like they were something they were not. “They wear Western clothes, eat Western food, read Western books…. Whatever it is,” Sung pointed out, “it is all Western.” He, therefore, invited his audience to tear down the façade. At the end of each service, he gave listeners the opportunity to confess and repent of, what many of them felt to be, their artificial lives. For people to stand at the front of the meeting hall and announce that they rejected stylish facets of modern city-life was to settle the unresolved, dual-identity that divided their souls. Tears were as much a sign of relief as they were of grief, for, as penitents embraced Sung’s message about the idealized countryside, they

193 Link, 20.
were reclaiming what appeared to be the familiar rural standards of conduct on how to live. ¹⁹⁴

A Reconstituted Morality

Moral decay was an axiomatic assumption for Sung, many of his listeners, and of revivalism generally. ¹⁹⁵ They all presumed that a better life had existed in the past, and that such a good life was possible again. Since cities became the locus and, in some ways, the source of the slide into modern debauchery, it should come as no surprise that Sung felt he needed to import virtues that he imagined still operated in the countryside. ¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ In the accounts of Sung’s revivals, one cannot help but notice the ever-present references to weeping and tears. Missionaries, in particular, drew special attention to the maudlin displays, explaining: “[This] cannot be done according to Oriental habits and opinions.” (See: Hendrik Kraemer, Van Godsdiensten en Menschen [About Religions and People] (Nijkerk, Netherlands: G. F. Callenbach, 1940), 179.) These emotional outbursts were a regular feature in Sung’s services. He, himself, would note approvingly: “When I was speaking I was shedding tears. All were shedding tears and raising hands to believe in Jesus.” (See: Song Shangjie, March 6, 1931, SSD, TTC.) Deep grief, mixed with great joy were the twin hallmarks of the conversions—or spiritual intensifications—that transpired during his revivals. Sung spoke of the ideal transformation as following this pattern: “After I heard the gospel, I knew I was a great sinner, and was very distressed and sad. I thought my sins could not be forgiven, but then I heard that Jesus is the Savior of sinners. He shed his blood to redeem sinners. I thought I am a sinner, Jesus loves me. I cried and confessed. Afterwards I believe Jesus forgave my sins. At that time my heart was refreshed and light. I already repented and came to the Lord, and asked Jesus to be the Lord of my heart. Praise the Lord! Jesus loves me. I have been born again!” (See: Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 46.) The emotional release that epitomized Sung’s revivals was not without a secular parallel. Sung noted that popular Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fiction, which also sentimentalized the countryside, did the same thing. The difference, in his opinion, was that after crying at the end of a novel, “[T]he feeling is good, but it was only temporary; it was a not more than an impulse. Absolutely nothing of a loving heart remains.” (See: Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 8.) Revivals, therefore, were the only place for xiashimin to resolve the deep-seated anxiety that plagued their lives.


When juxtaposed to the way life had been in the villages, the urban degradation was obvious:

Men have become women, and women have become men; today [people] preach cohabitation, tomorrow it will be divorce; every kind of bizarre phenomena are with us. Before, there were no cigarettes, but now cities are filled with them; before sons and daughters were filial and obedient to their mother and father, now they attack them, and oppose ethical education. Before students respected their teachers, but now they attack them. Before a few famous people had syphilis, but now 606, 914, and venereal disease doctors have become ubiquitous in cities. Everything has changed. Contemporary society is messed up, and the church is even more of a wreck. Just look at one place: Shanghai. The city has tens of thousands of prostitutes. The people of today only think about attaining high positions and great wealth.197

All the values Sung upheld, “including simplicity, tranquility, honesty, respect for elders and observance of family duties—were, from the perspective of [the city], primarily ‘countryside’ values.”198 Thus, Sung’s impassioned calls to repent—to turn around—were cast as appeals to return to a former way of life. People were to reject the individualistic impulses cultivated by modern consumerism, and recover the communal values of the

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197 Song Shangjie, Peilingji, 42. The mention of 606 and 914 are references to the two primary medications used to combat syphilis at the time. The numbers refer to the number of experiments carried out by the doctor who invented them, one Doctor Ehrlich of Frankfurt Germany. The medicines, interestingly enough, cost 7 yuan in 1928. It was not too expensive, but still out of reach for the lower class. This may be one more confirmation of the social status of Sung’s audience. It might also, though, be a popular cultural reference. The drugs were ubiquitous in Chinese advertising. Christian Henriot, Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849-1949, translated by Noël Castelino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 146-147, examined Shanghai newspapers in 1930 to see how many advertisements appeared for venereal diseases. In Shishi xinwen, seven advertisements were crammed into the pages; Shenbao had 16; Xinwenbao was virtually a catalogue for venereal disease treatments rather than an account of the days’ news. It held forty-six advertisements for ways to combat the dreaded—but all too common—illnesses.

198 Link, 202.
village. On the surface, at least, Sung proclaimed a conservative and appealing moral message to those uncomfortable with their “stylish” lives.\textsuperscript{199}

But even as Sung extolled traditional values, he reworked them for his urban context. Neither he, nor his audience, really expected to move back to their hometowns. His conservative moral directives, therefore, had to be reset for the city. For example, his call for obedience, the positive command he laid down more than any other except for prayer, was explained not in terms of obedience to elders, but in the context of choices people had to make in the city: people were to keep their contracts and to follow government orders to avoid demonstrations. His vice list had a similarly urban feel. To tell someone not to watch movies, go to dances, or become a lover of fashion would make no sense in the countryside. Sung’s morality, the ethical vision he presented as traditional and rural, was, in fact, freshly translated for the urban environment.

Translation, however, meant adaptation. The supreme virtue of filial piety, for instance, needed to be reworked in the city. Listeners no longer needed to live with their parents to show filial piety; Sung conceded that. But distance, he insisted, did not excuse anyone from showing his or her parents proper respect. Audiences, therefore, were regularly pressed to repent for disregarding their parents. Life in the city could not excuse blatant violations of the Confucian moral code. Sung’s own testimony became an

\textsuperscript{199} Michael J. McClymond, ed., \textit{Embodying the Spirit: New Perspectives on North American Revivalism} (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Pres, 2004), 31; William G. McLoughlin, \textit{Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham} (New York: Ronald Press, 1959). Both McClymond and McLoughlin note that revivalism can be radical, but more often than not it has proven to be conservative—especially when it is tied to premillennialism.
example of how to uphold traditional values in a new era. He shared how he honored his parents, even if biblical instruction had encouraged him to leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife (Gen. 2:24), and regardless of the fact that his itinerant ministry put more distance between them. His testimony used all the right phrases about revering his father, in particular, but his moral injunctions lacked specificity. Sung upheld filial piety, it was a non-negotiable part of traditional morality, but he now presented it as an attitude rather than an act. Rural norms were interpreted in light of urban realities.

Sung also needed to find ways of expressing traditional norms for sexual propriety with urban equivalents. In some cases, it was a pretty straightforward invocation of the past. Whereas some urban Chinese Christians promoted the idea that young people should be able to choose their own mates in marriage, Sung rejected the idea. “Are free romantic attachments love?” he queried his audience. “Free romantic attachments are sin! Look, today you have a romantic attachment, and get married, but

200 Song Shangjie. “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie].” Shengjie zhinan yuankan 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 26-31; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 1, 66.

201 On December 9, 1930, Sung recorded in his diary that he heard someone speak at the East China Christian Home Forward Movement Conference about how Chinese marriages were unhappy because they were not based on the couple choosing each other. Sung, at the time, did not report his own thoughts on the matter. While he was in the United States, he seemed disappointed that his parents were arranging his own marriage. (See, for example, Levi, The Diary of John Sung: Extracts from His Journals and Notes (Singapore: Genesis, 20012),16-17.) One might expect, therefore, that Sung sympathized with the plight he heard described. Once he left his rural ministry in 1931, though, Sung’s own opinion clearly solidified against free marriages.
tomorrow you are divorced." In his mind, urban life did not require adopting new forms of marriage. Traditional arrangements still worked just fine.

At other times, however, reworking sexual standards was more complicated. Sung, for instance, condemned men for visiting urban prostitutes. By doing so, however, he was not appealing to the traditional code of conduct. Historically, Chinese society showed little “unease, embarrassment, or shame” about men going to brothels. Yet, Sung could make the behavior sound like it deviated from custom. And that was important to him. Calling people to restore an imagined past was an essential feature of his revivalism. In this case, the past was relatively recent. About a generation before his revivals began, missionary preaching, modern sensibilities, and urban realities had combined to make the nuclear family the xiaoshimin ideal. His call to exclusive sexual relationships, therefore, did not sound innovative. It harkened back to a familiar standard, albeit it a rather new one, that operated among the petty urbanite class.

The sexual lives of women never came up in Sung’s sermons—itself, perhaps, a demonstration of the conservative bent in his ethic. Yet, the steady drumbeat of his denunciation against such female innovations as makeup and modern haircuts, and his exaltation of sexual ideals based on the nuclear family, caused many women to make personal appointments with Sung. In his presence, they confessed to homosexual

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202 Song Shanjie, Fenxingji, 10. See, also, Song Shangjie, March 3, 1931, SSD, TTC.

203 Sung’s own marriage was arranged while he was in the United States.

204 Henriot, 356.

205 Yeh, 1.
relationships, or—with surprising regularity—to “breaking the seventh
commandment.” Renouncing such behavior was to re-enshrine rural codes of sexual
conduct, even as their private and unchaperoned conversations with a man were
concessions to urban ways of behavior.

This updating of rural norms for the urban environment meant Sung’s
conservatism was never reactionary. He did not try to squeeze modern life back into an
ancient garment. He tailored his conservative moral vision, so that it was a fresh and
creative response to the modern city. That was most powerfully demonstrated in the way
Sung dealt with modern forms of leisure. At first blush, it appeared Sung lacked vision.
His pronouncements on how people spent their free time usually came in long lists of
prohibitions: do not smoke, drink alcohol, go to movies, read novels, use opium, watch
shows, attend dances, be drawn to socials, or go on picnics. The lists can be read as a
dry legalism, a conservative and inflexible stance towards innovations in entertainment.
For Sung, however, these behaviors were not rejected because they were novel or new,
but because they exacerbated the problems of the *xiaoshimin*. Religion was not the opiate

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206 See, for example: Song Shangjie, April 15, 1934, SSD, TTC.

207 One must note that particularly around forms of leisure, Sung’s prohibitions lose their gender
specific nature. These sins applied to men and women alike. One thing that is worth exploring further is the
relationship between these leisure activities and their spatial location in the cities. Maps of Tianjin and
Shanghai, for instance, reveal how certain sections of the city were densely packed with modern
entertainment options, whereas other parts had virtually none. Was Sung’s condemnation of the city,
therefore, really an attack on certain neighborhoods? Is that one reason why the family and home—often
further removed from these parts of the city—could remain sacrosanct? Further research is required, but the
link between geography and sin was certainly not foreign to Sung’s messages (see urban-rural divide
described above). In fact, if Sung’s sermons were really condemning just part of the city, he was giving
further justification for his listeners to stay in it—something both he and they were eager to do. See
Hershatter, 182-189; and Henriot, 222.
of the people, Sung concluded in opposition to the communist refrain. Modern forms of leisure, he dared to suggest, made the masses insensate. What else could explain what he saw? One man, for instance, adamantly insisted, “When I smoke I am truly happy! It is like I am in heaven!” Or Sung recalled a college student falling to the ground drunk in his good clothes. “This,” he asked his audience, “is happiness?” He likewise pilloried those who read novels. They become so engrossed in their books, he warned, they cannot sleep; they end up listless, suffer from headaches, and are prone to consumption. Truly, modern leisure numbs. He likened the condition of those who indulged in such things to the man possessed by a legion of demons (Mark 5:1-20):

Evil spirits want a person to take a stone and cut himself. Does it hurt? No, it doesn’t even hurt! Because he does not know pain! He still believes he is happy. Look: many people smoke, but in so doing they are just using stones to cut themselves; others read novels, but are only cutting themselves, watching movies—another way to cut themselves…Does attacking oneself hurt? No! No! People still feel happy! Still feel great!

Contemporary hedonism, or pig-ism, as Sung once called it, had a powerfully stultifying effect. He recalled once riding to Beiping [Beijing] on the train. He walked the whole length, from the first class car to the last in coach. “I saw the passengers engrossed either in smoking or reading newspapers,” Sung told the audience. “Everyone looked like

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208 Sung was certainly aware of the Marxist charge against religion. In more than one sermon he denied that his revivals were opium or an anesthetic for the people. See, for example, Song Shangjie, *Peilingji*, 79; Song Shangjie, “Xiang wo chui lingqi [May the Spirit Breathe on Me],” *Budao zazhi* [Evangelism] 8, no. 3 (May-June 1935): 12.


210 Ibid., 13.

211 Ibid., 15.
everyone else. I came to the end of coach. There only did I find a friend, a man seated serenely by himself. I asked him, ‘Friend, are you a Christian?’ He replied, ‘Praise the Lord!’"\(^{212}\) Only those few people who were not intoxicated by modern leisure escaped becoming insensible drones.

In opposition to modern leisure’s anesthetic, Sung offered a fresh, if bracing splash of cold water. The poverty, violence, sickness, and boredom that tormented the xiaoshimin were not to be avoided, nor their pain deadened. Instead, Sung’s converts were to wake up, and endure the suffering soberly and with a clear head. In one way, Sung was echoing a common refrain. Classical Chinese philosophers had long suggested that hardship could cultivate goodness. Sung’s contemporary, Zou Taofen, the editor of the popular journal Shenghuo, likewise, reminded his readers that in order to succeed they must first learn to chiku [eat bitterness].\(^{213}\) Where Sung diverged from this well-trod path, however, was in his premillennial eschatology. Its logic prompted him to rethink the purpose of suffering, and to give it new meaning.

Suffering, in Sung’s message, was not a refining fire on the way to this-worldly success. Suffering was indicative of the present crisis in history. Things were about to wrap up. Wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, and the darkening of the sun, were preludes to Christ’s return. For Sung, those promises of Jesus were even now being

\(^{212}\) Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 2, 33.

\(^{213}\) Yeh, 105-108; Sung used the same vocabulary. See, for example, Song Shangjie, *Chajingji [Bible Study Messages]* (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1968), 3.
fulfilled.\textsuperscript{214} Biblical predictions were materializing in detail. Not only were Jews returning to Palestine, but Sung explained that the prophet Isaiah’s question, “Who are these that fly as a cloud and as the doves to their windows?” (Isaiah 60:8) referred to modern airplanes.\textsuperscript{215} No wonder he spoke to his audience as, “end-of-the-world Christians.”\textsuperscript{216} In his mind, Christ would certainly return before a generation passed away.\textsuperscript{217} In at least one case, Sung was apparently even more specific: Christ would return in 1936.\textsuperscript{218}

Sung believed that when petty urbanites recognized the late hour, and understood that God was employing tribulations to discover who really trusted in him, then they would abandon seeking temporary respite from their pain and boredom in frivolous acts of leisure. Instead, with clear-eyes—untainted by inebriants, literal or figurative—believers could look for their coming king. For those willing to accept the Good News Sung proclaimed, \textit{xiaoshimin} suffering had meaning; it was the prelude to their salvation. “To endure bitterness for Jesus’ sake is surely the most hopeful thing one can do.” He added, “In this world, endure bitterness as you are witnessing for Jesus; in the coming

\textsuperscript{214} Song Shangjie, \textit{Peilingji}, 40-41.

\textsuperscript{215} Song Shangjie, \textit{Moshide jidutu dang zhuyide er da wenti} [Two Important Issues End-Time Christians Should be Aware Of], 9.

\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{217} Song Shangjie, \textit{Peilingji}, 42.

\textsuperscript{218} F. E. Reynolds, “Dr. Sung’s Revival Meetings,” Council for World Mission Archives, Fukien, Reports, Box no. 1-6 (H-2137), Zug, 1978. Box no. 5., 1927-29, No. 368, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.
millennial kingdom Jesus will put a crown of wealth and honor on our heads.” That was obviously not the reward associated with the traditional Confucian standards of conduct, which Sung and his audience imagined still held sway in the countryside. Sung’s teaching was an adaptation, or a translation of rural values into the urban idiom, and it was inflected—like all of Sung’s morality—by the Bible and modern circumstances. Such a message satisfied the xiaoshimin desire to stay in the city, but do so on terms that sounded familiar, safe, and—ultimately—comfortable.220

A Clash Over Converts

Sung’s sermons were not recorded in Tianjin, but whatever he was preaching, it seemed to have little impact at first. Low turnouts at the Li Yuanhong Memorial Hall left Sung lamenting the “lack of energy” in the meetings.221 A week into the services, Sung saw other disheartening signs. The banner, which hung over the door of the Memorial Hall announcing, “Dr. Sung Great Lecture Meeting,” was already taken down. And that evening, after a few days of incremental increases in attendance, he saw that the crowd had shrunk considerably. Sung left the service contemplating closing the meetings in Tianjin and moving on to Beiping [Beijing]. His hostess, however, Mrs. Guan, confronted him: “Ever since you arrived in Tianjin you thought first about going to Beiping, and [only] then asked God about it.” She continued, “This decision to go to Beiping is rather

219 Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 174.
220 Link, 235. In his study of literature from the time, Perry Link concluded that comfort was the chief aim of books that the xiaoshimin read in the 1930s.
221 Song Shangjie, April 17, 1934, SSD, TTC.
your own decision. You’re discouraged because the number of the people. You hold yourself up too high.”222 Her rebuke apparently cut Sung to the quick.

Sung repented and felt that a “heavy burden had been rolled away.”223 Recalling the action of John the Baptist, he became less so that Jesus might become more. He embraced the disappearance of his name from the public banner. He even commissioned new flyers to be printed and handed out. Whereas before his name was emblazoned on the advertisement, now it simply announced an “Evangelistic Meeting.”224 He recorded in his journal that for the first time in almost a week he had no desire to go to Beiping.225

The instant change in attitude could be mirrored in the revival services themselves. Sung’s revivalism had that kind of flexibility. The speed at which his revivals changed can best be appreciated when juxtaposed to another attempt at Christian renewal from the same time.

The National Christian Council of China launched the Five Year Forward Movement in 1929. The motto was, “Revive thy church, O Lord, beginning with me.” Its aim was to grow and renew the church—goals similar to Sung’s own. In organization and operation, however, the institutional attempt at revival was totally different. It relied heavily on foreign money. Close to 75 percent of the administrative costs were borne by

222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
224 Song Shangjie, April 18, 1934, SSD, TTC.
225 Song Shangjie, April 17, 1934, SSD, TTC.
donations from foreign missionaries and contributions from foreign mission boards.\textsuperscript{226} Financial security allowed C. Y. Cheng, the General Secretary of the NCC, to work out the movement’s initiatives according to what he thought Chinese Christians needed, not necessarily what they wanted. His decision to promote evangelism, religious education, literacy, Christianizing the home, stewardship, and youth in the church reflected the priorities of the church’s elites.\textsuperscript{227} In execution, the Five Year Forward Movement advanced at a ponderous pace. The NCC spent considerable time and energy producing and distributing resources that could complement its six-pronged advance.\textsuperscript{228} It then had to rely on Christian churches and organizations, which were all rather loosely affiliated with the NCC, to actually implement the curriculum. Not surprisingly, the movement’s penetration among Chinese Christians was uneven, and the results disappointing.\textsuperscript{229}

Sung, by contrast, demonstrated extraordinary flexibility, and he could change his services, literally, overnight. His style of revivalism allowed instant feedback. He could see and hear when a message struck a chord; he knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, if he had “moved” his audience.\textsuperscript{230} If people came forward to repent of their sins and believe in Christ for salvation, he could be confident that he was addressing real needs. If the crowd


\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 98.


\textsuperscript{229} Merwin, 98.

\textsuperscript{230} Song Shangjie, “Matai fuyin di liu zhang [Matthew Chapter Six],” \textit{Shengjie zhinan yuekan} 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 10-11.
was apathetic he might blame their spiritual lassitude, but he could also adjust his message. And he did that in Tianjin. At the beginning of the revival campaign, he wrote down the 18 topics he wanted to cover while he was in the city. He soon abandoned the plan, though, and improvised the rest of the way. He was free to move with the Spirit, and with the spirit of his urban audience.

Sung’s nimble operation gave him a competitive advantage in Tianjin’s religious marketplace. He could quickly tailor his revival services to meet the evolving spiritual needs of the petty urbanites. Meanwhile, Christian organizations like the Lianhehui, or Tianjin Union of Churches—which had worked to curb religious consumerism by spearheading a unity movement—could do little more than produce their same standard fare and issue warnings for their members to stay away from Sung’s novelties. “His extremely emotional appeal [places] an emphasis upon some divisive elements in Christian thought,” the leadership cautioned the city’s Christians. Yet the appeal to ignore Sung largely fell on deaf ears. As one missionary admitted, “There is something lacking in the Gong Li Hui [ABCFM] and its leadership when a man like Dr. Sung so obviously does minister to the spiritual needs of a mentionable fraction of our church

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231 Song Shangjie, April 11, 1934ff., SSD, TTC.

232 Official Journal of the Forty Second Session of the North China Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, August 22-26, 1934, 333.
membership.” He concluded, “I wish we were more fervent in spirit.” Sung had something that no one else in the mission could offer.

The Wesley Church responded to the surge in Sung’s popularity by promoting a hastily organized “New Birth Movement.” Flyers were quickly handed out around the city promoting Wesley’s alternative services, which were to be held at 3:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.—the exact times when Sung led his meetings in the Li Yuanghong Memorial Hall. But Wesley did not fare well in direct competition with Sung. No one did in Tianjin.

In many of the cities he visited, Sung’s services united and invigorated existing congregations. In Tianjin, however, the attempt to compete directly with him split the church. When congregational leaders forced people to make a choice between their churches and Sung’s services, the frustrated revivalist instructed his audience “to leave the devil’s church.”

Zhang Zhouxin, one of his bourgeois backers, immediately organized the Shenghuisuo [The Holy Assembly Center], and welcomed all the defectors.

Churches across Tianjin witnessed a drain on their church rolls. In 1933, before Sung’s revival campaign, Wesley had 646 members and, on average, 550 people in worship. The following year, things were strikingly different. The annual report tried to paper over the wound. “Last year Wesley Church suffered because of a division among

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234 Song Shangjie, April 28, 1934, SSD, TTC.

235 Wenona Jett to friends, Feb. 1, 1936, China Records Project RG 8, Box 104, Folder 6, Yale Divinity School Library.

236 Song Shangjie, April 27, 1934, SSD, TTC.
some of the church members. We are grateful to God that Wesley has survived this division. A turn to the statistical table, though, revealed how seriously the church hemorrhaged. Membership plummeted all the way down to 285, and worship attendance sank to 121. Other denominations did not fare much better. W. F. Dawson, a missionary with the London Missionary Society, lamented that baptisms had dried up. A number of people, whom the mission had prepared for the rite of initiation, decided to be washed clean in the newly organized church instead. A “few hundred” people were gone from their old churches, he opined, because they wanted to hear “the Gospel in the way that appeals to them.”

In the midst of China’s emerging consumer culture, Sung had successfully given urban audiences another religious option. His revivalism did not monopolize the market, but it did find a faithful following, especially among the xiaoshimin. Some of the members of that class found his revival performances and sermons particularly satisfying, as they depicted a safe spiritual home in the midst of widespread urban anomie.

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237 Official Minutes of the Forty Third Session of the North China Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, August 21-26, 1935, 458.

238 Ibid.

239 W. F. Dawson, LMS Annual Report, 1938, Council for World Mission Archives, North China, Reports, 1866-1939, Box no. 1-12 (H-2139), Zug. 1978, Box no. 11-1935, no. 800, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.

240 W. F. Dawson, LMS Annual Report, 1935, Council for World Mission Archives, North China, Reports, 1866-1939, Box no. 1-12, (H-2139), Zug. 1978, Box no. 11-1931, No. 798, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.
Conclusion

Except for being held in a major urban center, Sung’s revival services in Tianjin were idiosyncratic. He faced unusually erratic attendance and strong institutional resistance. He ultimately called for his followers to organize their own church—something he only did one other time during the span of his ministry, far preferring his followers to stay in churches started by Western denominations. Yet precisely because the events in that treaty port city were unusual, the people who attended his services came to light. The fight with the Wesley Church forced a certain segment of Sung’s backers to surface as brokers: a small wealthy segment of the population endorsed Sung’s ministry.

The appearance of China’s elite was not the full story. The rich were but a tiny fraction of the people who came to Sung’s services. The underclass, likewise, were underrepresented in his meetings. Most of the people that attended Sung’s revival meetings were xiaoshimin, or petty urbanites. They were particularly receptive to his message, as it offered a word of comfort to a class of people who were generally anxious about poverty, violence, sickness, and boredom. The way Sung’s sermons summoned images of the countryside and home offered immigrants, who were ambivalent about their urban lives, a way to deal with their internal conflicts.

Sung’s idealization of the countryside, the place from which his audience had only recently come, was not a straightforward rejection of the city. The old lifestyle, the one that he presented as so stable and reliable, needed to be re-imagined for the new
situations people encountered in treaty ports and other urban centers. Sung adapted and thereby changed the moral wisdom of the past for the present situation.

He was able to do that in a way that met the desires of many the petty urbanites. With revivalism’s light structure, Sung could adapt his particular message until he found a way to slake the spiritual thirst of those who came to his revivals looking for something they did not find in their own congregations. His ability frustrated several of the city’s church leaders and some tried to undermine Sung’s work. Their opposition, however, only pushed hundreds of the xiaoshimin out of their old churches and into the new one created by Sung’s revival.
CHAPTER FOUR
MODERNIZING WOMEN

In October of 1935, seven hundred people dressed in white squeezed together on the quay in Singapore to say goodbye to John Sung. In an unusual display of emotion, some in the crowd cried, while others called out well wishes for his journey.¹ The moment, caught by a photographer, has been an iconic image in the legacy of John Sung: it stands as a testimony to his mass appeal.² Upon closer inspection the photograph also reveals another story, one as yet untold. Most of those lining the wharf that morning were women, many of whom clasped white flags with red crosses—the emblems of their newly formed evangelistic teams. Chinese women swelled the ranks of the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League, creating a revivalistic movement that acted as a vehicle for ferrying them into the modern world of the Straits Settlements.

Revivalism and modernity went hand-in-hand in Singapore, just as it did in so many of the urban areas Sung visited throughout his career. Each one created the environment for the other to flourish. Modernizing pressures from immigration, state

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regulation, nuclear family formation, and contested gender expectations prompted many women to embrace Sung’s revivalism.3

Revivalism’s emphasis on evangelism, meanwhile, not only encouraged voluntary activism, but also called forth new kinds of organizational structures to spread the gospel — both factors in forging modern identities. Fueling one another, revivalism and modernity ignited a movement that women used, for a time, to cast new places for themselves in Singaporean society.

From a Minority to a Majority

When the men of the Singapore Christian Union invited John Sung to expand his ministry outside of China and come to their city in 1935, neither demographics nor cultural expectations hinted at the way women would capitalize on the event in their efforts to secure a place in Singaporean society.4 The meetings suggested nothing unusual, other than their incredible popularity. A local newspaper characterized Sung’s

3 This chapter specifically provides a description of what happened in Singapore, but all the evidence suggests what transpired there was not unique. Wherever Sung went, he drew a disproportionate number of female followers, and his evangelistic teams were repeatedly filled with large numbers of women. This was remarkable in a country where men outnumbered women in church membership. Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Advance Through Storm, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 347. For details of the high proportion of women, one can consult Song’s own diaries. Women far outnumbered men in their response to his calls for conversion. Also, see the heavy representation of women in his evangelistic bands in other parts of China: Song Shangjie, ed., Quanguo jidutu budaotuan tuankan [National Christian Evangelistic League Publication] (December 1936). Further evidence of the high visibility of women in Sung’s services can be glimpsed in: L. G. Phillips, LMS Report 1935, Council for World Mission Archives, Fukien, Reports, Box no. 1-6 (H-2137), Zug, 1978, Box no. 5, 1927-29, No. 370, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong; Howard and Mary Cliff, “Dear Friends,” Bible For China (May 1933): 40.

4 Sung’s trip to Singapore proved to be his second revival outside of China. Four months earlier, in May 1935, John Sung made his first trip to Southeast Asia when he visited the Philippines. Over the next two years, he followed immigration and trade routes to the Chinese communities in the Straits Settlements, the Dutch East Indies, Taiwan, and Burma. These trips were relatively short; Sung continued to focus his ministry on Mainland China until the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 forced him to move his work to Southeast Asia on a semi-permanent basis.
revival campaign as “hot and noisy”—the ideal characteristic of any Chinese religious gathering—and his services rapidly gained momentum. Meetings grew from six hundred people in attendance at the Telok Ayer Methodist Church, to over two thousand. Approximately thirteen hundred eager listeners squeezed into the sanctuary while an additional seven hundred disappointed latecomers settled for listening to Sung’s voice crackle over loudspeakers placed in windowsills. Students, unwilling to forego their seats, virtually camped at the church, leaving some local schools half empty for the duration of the campaign. Before Sung left Singapore, he preached forty messages over fourteen days, and concluded with a final healing service. The religious fervor sparked a run on Bibles and Sung’s revival chorus books, forcing distributors in Kuala Lumpur to rush deliveries to Singapore in order to cover the deficit. But, “the outstanding creation of his ministry,” as one participant later noted, was the establishment of evangelistic teams.

At the climax of his meetings in Singapore, Sung challenged his listeners to commit to an evangelistic team. He believed evangelism was a nonnegotiable aspect of

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8 Sng, 182.
discipleship. He gave few instructions to teams, nothing more than an outline. At least two people were required to form a group. They were to meet once a week to tell others about Jesus, whether speaking to them on the streets, in homes, or in prisons. Unlike pastors and missionaries who were paid to preach, Sung insisted band members should pay for the privilege to preach. Thus, weekly collections would be taken to purchase tracts or underwrite travel expenses. Participation would be costly, he warned, but it promised to continue the revival after he was gone.9

The response to Sung’s invitation to join an evangelistic team cut across all lines in the assembly as hundreds of people pushed their way forward.10 Before it was over the platform and front of the sanctuary more than exceeded its capacity, as approximately ten percent of the island’s Chinese Protestant population enlisted to preach the gospel.11 Men,  

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9 Xingzhou budaotuan tuankan, 1935-1936 [Singapore Christian Evangelistic League, 1935-36] (Singapore, 1936; reprinted in 2000), 78-80, hereafter referred to as SCEL, 1935-36. What exists from Singapore was written five months after the revival, and displays more codification than Sung usually supplied. Therefore, I have only repeated his more general instructions that were consistent with other contemporary accounts of how he organized teams. See, for example, H.A. Wiese, ‘China Crusaders,’ The Other Sheep (August 1935): 12.

10 Numbers from Sung’s initial call are not recorded. When he held a training a month later, 732 people attended. See, Nanyang huqiao jidujiao peiling dahu, photograph, 1935, Chin Lien Seminary, Singapore. At the beginning of 1936, the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League counted 600 people who signed up to be volunteer evangelists through the teams. Both numbers are impressive.

11 Determining the exact proportion of Chinese Protestants in Singapore who joined a team is elusive. Since most church records in 1935 did not differentiate Chinese from other ethnicities, nor count Singapore separately from the rest of the Straits Settlements, it is impossible to know exactly how many Chinese Protestants were on the island. Borrowing, however, from government data that claimed that 2.7% of all Chinese in the Straits Settlements were Christians, I can estimate that approximately 11,500 Chinese Christians were in Singapore. Insofar as roughly half of the Christians were Roman Catholic, there were about 5,750 Chinese Protestants on the island. If that number is fairly accurate, than more than 10% of all Protestant Christians in Singapore were on an evangelistic team. See, Annual Report of the Straits Settlements, 1935 (Singapore 1935), 7; Tong Chee Kiong, “Religion,” in The Making of Singapore Sociology: Society and State, edited by Tong Chee Kiong and Lian Kwen Fee (Leiden: Brill and Times Academic Press, 2002), 370-71; Alan J.A. Elliot, Chinese Spirit-Medium Cults in Singapore, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, no. 14 (London: Athlone Press, 1955), 29; and Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History, edited by Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Hing, and John Roxburgh (Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1992).
women, and children all solemnly pledged to evangelize the island. Clergy and laity both joined. People from Guangdong and Fujian, the two Chinese provinces with by far the most immigrants in Singapore, were evenly represented. Several who came from other places in China signed up as well. The volunteers were not limited to any particular demographic.

The evangelistic teams may have been broadly popular, but that did not mean that those who joined were evenly representative. Women were clearly in the majority. In the photo that captured the first enthusiastic volunteers, 54% of volunteers were female. Seemingly a small—even negligible—edge, until one remembers that in 1935 women and girls comprised but a third of the Chinese population on the island.12

**Born Again, Born Into Modernity**

Women joined evangelistic teams in unexpectedly high numbers, prompting one to explore why. What were women doing by aligning themselves with an evangelistic band? A complex array of forces was threatening Singaporean Chinese women’s identity in 1935. In part, Sung’s evangelistic teams provided a way for women to transform the potentially destructive realities into the building blocks of a new female identity.

John Sung’s Messages: A Two-Edged Sword

The story of women modernizing through the formation of evangelistic teams is primarily their own, but the role of John Sung cannot be neglected. His revivals were the

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catalyst that energized the process. In some ways that seems counterintuitive. If a person eavesdropped on his sermons, one would have heard Sung repeating a common trope from the era: modern women were dangerous. For two decades, China’s most popular literature had consistently presented its heroes with the necessity of choosing between two women. The first was stylish. She wore modern clothes and makeup; her hair was cut short and permed. She was a modern woman, smart and aggressive. Her foil was equally attractive, but in a less flashy way. Beauty was not painted on her face, but seen in her refinement. The traditional woman was deferential to China’s historic norms of conduct, and did not thrust herself into the world; she retired contentedly to the home. The extravagance of the modern woman was temporarily attractive, but the heroes of Mandarin Duck and Butterfly literature repeatedly learned that the new style woman was ultimately destructive and not to be preferred to her conservative sister.\footnote{E. Perry Link, Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities (Berkeley: University of California Press); See also: Wolfram Eberhard, Guilt and Sin in Traditional China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 38. Eberhard demonstrates that the idea circulated in more than popular fiction. Morality books, circulated in temples or by religious devotees in the 1930s, described the specific hell that awaited women who wore foreign clothes and cut their hair short.}

Sung succinctly repeated the same message throughout his sermons. He spoke, for example, of a teacher “who told students to be honest, to believe in Jesus, to follow his example. But she herself? She had a perm, studied how to dance, and spoke about romantic love. Agh!”\footnote{Song Shangjie, Fenxingji [Revival Messages] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1989), 42.} It was impossible for Sung to imagine that the teacher could choose to be both a modern woman and a disciple of Jesus. For him, rather, it was the young lady who repented of “her days immersed in cosmetics,” who could be trusted.
“She changed to all simplicity,” Sung crowed, “a total transformation.” Sung reinforced the popular, and even political, message of the time. “Women were told to return to the home to be dutiful daughters, chaste wives, and good mothers.”

Despite Sung’s clear sympathy and preference for the place of women in the home, his revivalism tended to subvert his own message. For in the end, Sung preached the same idea three times every day: “The Lord saves men, and also saves women. This is true gender equality.” His peculiar order of salvation, which reached its climax in evangelism, meant that women had to preach the gospel. He was insistent upon it.

The role of women in his own life shaped his perception of women preaching. Of course he commonly testified that it was a girl-evangelist in New York, Uldine Utley, who triggered his own spiritual transformation. Closer to home, Sung also spoke of his sister, who, during a revival in 1909 began to preach on the streets to men. In addition, Shi Meiyu [Mary Stone], the co-founder of the Bethel Mission, organized the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band that launched Sung’s revivalistic career, only after her

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16 Peter Zarrow, China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949 (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 261. Zarrow points out that this message extended beyond popular literature, but was a hallmark of the New Life Movement that the Chinese government inaugurated in 1934. A series of forces, therefore, collaborated to circumscribe the modern Chinese woman. The state and society could tolerate a modern woman, but they wanted her in the home—taking care of hygiene and eradicating superstition. Sung’s emphasis in the Christian home was not far removed from that vision. A woman who Christianized the home could save the nation.


18 See chapter 2.

19 Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi geren jianzheng [The Testimony of Dr. Song Shangjie],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 27; Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 110.
duties at the hospital precluded her from responding to all the invitations she received to preach. Sung’s own national and international ministry owed its existence to women’s pioneering preaching.

Perhaps the role of women in his own life made him sensitive to their presence in the Bible. Sung preached numerous sermons that focused on the faith of female biblical characters. For him, they were the premier models of Christian faith. The woman at the well, for instance, was the first person to ever preach about Jesus. The lady who poured out her alabaster jar on the Lord’s feet would be remembered eternally: “not some great man, but a girl,” Sung reminded everyone. In the end, women even surpassed Jesus’ twelve male disciples, because they followed him all the way to the cross. “Women especially have faith,” Sung concluded. “Their faith is greater than men’s.”

Women so dominated Sung’s depiction of faithfulness that he made shocking statements. In one sermon about the Israeliite slave girl who spoke about God to her

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21 Kwok Pui-lan, “Chinese Women and Protestant Christianity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present, edited by Daniel H. Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 200, noted that by the end of the nineteenth century Protestant Christians in China had come focus their messages on the Gospels. For those who had ears to hear, that meant stories of women became more prominent. The Gospels, compared to the rest of the canon, place particular emphasis on women. Sung certainly preached regularly from the Gospels, but he also uncovered—even seemed to seek out—more obscure stories of biblical women.

22 Cornelie Baarbé, Dr. Sung, een Reveil op Java: Over de Evangelist Dr. Sung en zijn preken (Den Haag, Netherlands: Voorhoeve, 1960), 33-35.


25 Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 126.
Syrian master, Sung unabashedly identified himself with the young woman. “Now I am this little slave girl tonight to tell you about the Savior.” More often, Sung presented his audiences a feminized Jesus. For instance, Sung soothed an anxious audience with the promise that “Jesus talks to sinners in a sweet voice, like a mother calling.” Indeed, Jesus often sounded like a coddling mother in his sermons. Sung regularly had Jesus using pet, or house names. Each person in the audience was Jesus’ “baobei [precious baby or darling],” or “little child.” In a particularly dramatic example of feminization, Sung vividly described Jesus as a second Mary, the woman who poured her perfume on the Lord (John 12:1-8). Mary sacrificed; she loved; she faced opposition; and she laid down her body. Sung reminded everyone Jesus would eventually do the same. No one could misunderstand the direction that the analogy ran. Sung put it this way: “[Jesus] broke His alabaster box from which flowed that ointment of love, salvation, even His precious blood.” Christ followed Mary’s example, not the other way around. The sermon circulated in Singapore, but when it was published in China some parts of that provocative message did not survive. Jesus no longer cried as Mary cried, and the assertion that “when our Lord was on earth, the majority of those who loved him were

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women,” was deleted. Editors tried to correct Sung, in order to align his outlook with their own.

His affirmations of women, however, were not so easily disguised. They proceeded automatically from his *ordo salutis*, his personal experience of women who proclaimed the Good News, and his immersion in biblical narratives. He was unfazed by the criticism he received from Ni Tuosheng [Watchman Nee] and his Little Flock for allowing women to preach. He knew they cited Paul’s injunction for a woman to remain silent, but he dismissed the argument. Something greater than Paul’s command was at

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30 Ibid., 94, 92. It is impossible, at this point, to determine for sure whether the message in *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 2 (92-96) added the lines that glorified women and feminized Jesus, or if the message in *Peilingji [Devotional Messages]* (97-102) edited those lines out. Presumably both sermons were reprinted from an original text—probably a sermon that first appeared in a Christian magazine. However, I have not been able to locate that original publication. Timothy Tow, the compiler of *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons* said the sermon he translated came from another Chinese collection that his Aunt, Miss Alice Doo, had published in Singapore. I have also not been able to secure that Chinese collection, so that it has even been impossible for me to compare the message in *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons* and the sermon in *Peilingji* in the same language. Nonetheless, I am confident that the sermon Tow translated into English is based on the same text that appeared in *Peilingji*. That may not be as self-evident as it first appears. Sung preached the same sermons multiple times in various places. Therefore, one sometimes runs across a sermon that sounds almost identical to another, but eventually reveals real differences—especially in the choice of sermon illustrations. No such divergences exist in the English and Chinese copies. Thus, I believe they were both reprinting the identical sermon. The differences between the two, therefore, are the comments about Jesus and women mentioned above. Did Tow add the sentences in English, or did the editor of *Peilingji* delete them in Chinese? It makes the most sense that the Chinese editor deleted them. In the forty sermons that Tow translated I uncovered several cases where he cut out lines from Sung’s sermons, but found no evidence that he ever added any. It would be odd, in this one case, for him to add something that could be controversial. It makes more sense that Tow included Sung’s words, even though he might have disagreed with them. He warned his readers that he harbored some objections to what he translated. “Nor are some of the things [Sung preached] without reproach, for after all, he was but an earthen vessel.” (Timothy Tow, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 17). I suspect the editor of *Peilingji* had less tolerance for Sung’s countercultural notions. Unlike Alice Doo, who published the sermon in Singapore, the editor of *Peilingji* apparently felt it necessary to tone down Sung’s feminization of Christ, and his exaltation of women.

31 Song Shangjie, April 29, 1933, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore (henceforth, referred to as SSD, TTC); Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 48, 133; Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 2, 85; Song Shangjie, *Peilingji [Devotional Messages]* (Hong Kong: Bellman House, n.d), 78.

32 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 133.
work here. The experience of full salvation dictated women do otherwise. To hear God’s message, but not proclaim it to others would be like eating without working. It “results in dropsy.”33 “Do you like to be dumb?” Sung specifically asked all the women in a service. “It is agonizing not to be able to express oneself well. How much more to remain dumb. Whoever does not witness is dumb…. Jesus tells the dumb to speak.”34 Women, Sung explained, were commanded by their Lord to preach.

Immigration and Salvation

In 1935 many of the Chinese women who would have heard Sung’s directive to preach the gospel were new in Singapore, having only arrived after the passing of the Alien’s Ordinance Act three years prior. Before that time Singapore was almost exclusively a destination for temporary male workers. Women were rare in such a fluid environment. In 1884, for instance, women comprised just ten percent of the population.35 The new law tried to stabilize Singapore’s lopsided gender ratio by restricting Chinese male immigrants, but welcoming women. In the short span between the enactment of the new government policy and Sung’s arrival, more than 75,000 women (not counting girls) flooded the Straits Settlements colony. Their arrival en masse


34 Ibid., 88.

was not enough to bring gender parity, but it was a significant enough spike to mean that roughly one in three women in Singapore was a new arrival.\textsuperscript{36}

Newly arrived, however, did not translate into newly home. Quite the opposite, Chinese women frequently complained that they did not feel settled in Singapore. While earlier male immigrants had created fictive kin structures based on common surnames or shared dialects to orient their new lives, women were largely excluded from such organizations. In one neighborhood, for example, few women belonged to any association, and of those that did, 97\% never attended a meeting. Without traditional family structures, women remained almost entirely isolated.\textsuperscript{37}

They were caught in the middle of the immigrant narrative that, when stripped down to its essentials, may be described as: home – not home – home again. Singapore was distinctly, “not home.” Newly arrived Chung Lai Cheng, for instance, complained that she did “not understand where some of these Singapore customs come from.”\textsuperscript{38} Another woman noted that the behavior of people in Singapore was so different than in China, it “made her feel embarrassed.”\textsuperscript{39} But more than culture shock was at work. For many women, their experiences in Singapore undermined the possibility of ever arriving home, of completing the immigrant narrative arc. The story of Mrs. Wong is illustrative.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Annual Report of the Straits Settlements, 1936} (Singapore 1936), 10, 103; Wong, 16-17.


\textsuperscript{38} Kaye, 237.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 239.
She immigrated to Singapore to earn money to support eight siblings in China. However, after she married a gambler on the island, things fell apart. She became both alienated from her home in China when she could no longer send money to her family despite their angry threats, and her hope of creating a new home in Singapore was likewise undermined when she had to sell her own children to cover her husband’s debts. For many women in Singapore, their lives were characterized by a seemingly irresolvable state of displacement.

The revival narrative that entered Singapore with John Sung, therefore, had particular appeal. His message spoke to an aching desire: the lost could be found. Listeners could easily merge the immigrant and revival narratives, just as Sung did so powerfully when he preached the archetypical sermon of the revival, the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The biblical story of the young man going away to the far country was simultaneously the immigrant narrative (home – not home – home again), and the classic revivals narrative (lost – found). The message had overwhelming appeal. When Sung preached that sermon, people were seized by conviction and shaken with sobs. The story needed no explanation in Singapore. It was the immigrant’s story; it was the sinner’s story; it was these women’s story.41


41 Sng, 180.
Home became the central metaphor for Sung’s female converts. Borrowing from his revival chorus book, they repeatedly sang, “Return home! Return home! Nevermore to roam! Open your arms Heavenly Father, I am coming home!” In fact, Sung’s songs were filled with imagery of home, and women eagerly mined them for comfort and to spread the gospel. Women discovered that the revival narrative offered a powerful resolution to their spiritual and physical displacement. It gave them the vocabulary to claim, “Heaven is My Home.”

The heavenly home they referred to may have had an otherworldly dimension, but the evangelistic message was not “going home” deferred. The teams set about creating a new home on earth. Those born again, as the language itself suggested, entered a new family. Team members called one another “brother,” and “sister,” or in the case of the

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42 Fenxing Duangeji, [Revival Choruses], in Xingzhou budaotuan tuankan, 1946 [Singapore Christian Evangelistic League, 1946], 183ff., song number 62 (hereafter this publication will be referred to as SCEL, 1946).

43 Dickson Bruce, And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-Folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1974), 102. In his study of American revival choruses, Bruce determined that people sang of “‘home’ more than anything else.” The choruses were used both for comfort in the midst of a world that was perceived as being filled with trials, and as a tool to encourage other people to convert and make their home in heaven. Examples of how “home” appeared in Sung’s chorus book can be found in SCEL, 1946, 183ff., song numbers 4, 12, 62, 110, 141, and the like.

44 Fenxing Duangeji, [Revival Choruses], in SCEL 1946, 183ff., song number 141.

45 Bruce, 102-106. The move of Chinese women in Singapore to make a new home on earth stood in stark contrast to the southern plain-folk of the United States. Dickson noted that in American camp meetings, revival converts understood their heavenly-home to mean a total rejection of life in the world. Chinese women in Singapore, however, understood their new heavenly home to entail the creation of a new family.
teams’ leader, (Leona) Wu Jingling, “mother.” As had happened at Ginling College, Wu’s alma mater, the familial discourse had a powerful socializing effect.

Members of the evangelistic teams imagined themselves bound together in ways that superseded other commitments. This was visually displayed through the identical white uniforms and pins women wore when they evangelized. The outfits proclaimed each woman’s identity: she was washed clean and sanctified by the blood of the lamb. Other social markers, like a woman’s marital status, were subordinated in the group. What mattered was that the women were redeemed. By wearing the same clothes when working collaboratively to win the lost, women intensified their united sense of “us” (the

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46 Jinxi jiniankan, 1985 [Singapore Christian Evangelistic League Golden Jubilee Souvenir Magazine, 1985], 10. The language of “brother” and “sister” had clear biblical precedents. The introduction of the term “mother” for Wu Jingling, however, may be an indication that the Singapore teams were drawing on the language of other social movements led by women. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, for instance, relied heavily on maternal language. Not only were many of its leaders called, “mothers,” but the women of the WCTU justified their actions in the public sphere by casting their roles as “social housekeepers.” See: Ian Tyrell, Woman’s World, Woman’s Empire: The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880-1930 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1991), 125-127; Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present, 3rd Edition (New York: F. Watts, 1983), 142-147; 226-235.

47 Jin Feng, Making of a Family Saga: Ginling College (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), has argued that the constantly reiterated notion of the “Ginling family” was what bound the school together despite external pressures and internal fissures. In an all-women’s college, it was also the mediating idea that allowed students to imagine themselves as upholding the domestic ideal, even as they expressed it as moving into the public sphere to mother the nation.

48 Alvyn Austin, China’s Millions: The China Inland Mission and Late Qing Society, 1832-1905 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), describes the power of the color system missionaries introduced to China through the Wordless Book. Although, white had other connotations in China, it also became associated with holiness through Christianity.

49 White uniforms have frequently acted as signs of purity for women whose situation was ambiguous. See, for example: Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “‘Together and in the Harness’: Women’s Traditions in the Sanctified Church,” Signs 10, no. 4 (Summer 1985): 685; Isabel Mukonyora, Wandering: A Gendered Wilderness (Berne, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2007), 92, also notes the power of white uniforms to undermine authoritarian power structures imposed on women and minorities.
converted) against “them” (the unconverted).\textsuperscript{50} A new family identity was forming. The frequency of meetings each week spurred on close identification with other team members, and the introduction of snacks and tea before they set out to evangelize replicated the gathering of a family around a meal. An alternative home was created that had remarkable appeal.

Women not only identified a new sort of family within their evangelistic team, but across teams as well. Despite linguistic differences, all the evangelistic bands began to use the same translation of the Bible—the one John Sung used and sold. Furthermore, the revival chorus book that Sung introduced had a significant unifying effect. A woman, who attended Sung’s revival as a girl, remembered: “He was able to lead people in singing, even though they didn’t know the song…. The song would be translated into Hokkien, and then people would sing simultaneously in both Mandarin and Hokkien.”\textsuperscript{51} To join an evangelistic team was to share in a common Christian identity, not simply a regional or linguistic one. Through their teams, women expanded the space wherein they found a place to belong.

A Modernizing Religion

The need for a place to belong was augmented by women’s search for a spiritual refuge. The Smashing Superstition Movement in China, whence many women recently came, intensified the pressure for women to change, to modernize. Beginning in 1928,

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{SEEL, 1935-36}, 103.

\textsuperscript{51} Tay Poh Luan (Mrs.), interview, February 27, 2000, access number 002239, reel 4, National Archives of Singapore.
the Nationalist government set out to eradicate all religious practices that appeared non-scientific, or more specifically, those aspects of Chinese life that appeared as roadblocks to modernity. Political progressives and intellectual elites dispatched forces to destroy temples and suppress “superstitious” behavior. Since the anti-superstition campaigns were primarily directed against traditional religion, which was popularly considered “women’s business,” women were particularly vulnerable to attack, and easily painted as retardants to Nationalist aims for a modern Chinese society. Politically, therefore, women found it advantageous to distance themselves from the stigma of traditional religion. Yet most were uncertain how to modernize spiritually.

Many women finally found, therefore, a desirable religious option in the Singapore revival of 1935. John Sung’s evangelistic identity was formed during the Smashing Superstition Movement in China. In his messages he had learned to capitalize on his Ph.D. in Chemistry from a Western university, and he promoted his capacity to distinguish scientific truth from superstition. Sung used his extremely rare scientific credentials as a way to argue that even his spiritual teachings were modern. He could therefore appease the Chinese elites enamored with science, and appear to conform to the

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52 Freedman, 45; In her detailed study of the Smashing Superstition campaign, Nedostup noted how the state demonized practitioners of popular religion, and through its propaganda highlighted the negative role of women. One poster, for instance, was a drawing of an outrageously opulent Chinese temple filled exclusively with female devotees. The poster urged people not to waste their money at temples, but give their resources to “build the nation instead.” Women were presented as especially susceptible to superstition and heterodoxy. Rebecca Nedostup, Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 199-200, 222.


54 Chapter 1.
Nationalist demands for a modern religiosity. Yet at the same time, his revivals subverted the state’s ideals. While officials condemned such things as religious healings, otherworldly visions and belief in supernatural forces that could reveal the future, Sung’s revivals emphasized those very elements. He used his credentials as a modern scientist to justify large swaths of popular Chinese religiosity. Women who joined his evangelistic teams, therefore, did not have to abandon all their traditional, so-called “superstitious” beliefs. They saw in Sung’s Christianity a way to incorporate familiar practices into a new, “modern” religion.

The inclusion of traditional religious elements in Sung’s style of Christianity allowed female converts to express their religious concerns in the same gendered categories as before. Whereas men struggled to transfer the concerns that drove them to the temples—almost always “bad luck” in business or gambling—to the God of Jesus Christ, women seamlessly moved their traditional religious concerns about unfaithful husbands, wayward children, and physical illnesses to their new Lord. Women found it natural to focus on God’s intervention in healing the sick and restoring family harmony. They also rejoiced that the Christian God communicated in familiar ways through dreams and visions. The women spoke easily about Jesus or an angel delivering messages to

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57 For illuminating examples, see SCEL, 1946, 45, 49-50; 62-63; 69-71; 76-78.
them or to those they evangelized. Frequently the women’s views about spiritual realities appeared in team reports. One team of women, for instance, having shared the gospel with a family who did not immediately accept the Good News, reveled in the fact that:

three days later, in the middle of the night a dark shadow suddenly pulled [a] woman from her bed, knocking her out as she fell to the floor. Meanwhile, her daughter-in-law continued to sleep. Unexpectedly, [the daughter-in-law] felt someone clothed in white hit her on the head, waking her up. She arose, and saw her mother-in-law lying on the floor. She got her up and prayed for her. They received the Lord’s grace, and the woman was completely healed. The whole family accepted the Lord. 58

The account was certainly about extraordinary events, but the description of demonic forces, angelic beings, and physical healing was not unusual. They had precedent in traditional Chinese religion. Women recognized that, for themselves at least, conversion to Christianity was a transfer of allegiance, not the abandonment of popular feminine spirituality.

The Double Bind of Gender Expectations

Women faced conflicting pressures as the nuclear family system evolved in Singapore. When the multigenerational family ideal failed to take shape in Singapore, women were bombarded with messages and images that told them to break with custom, and become modern. An essay published during the time of Sung’s evangelistic campaign demanded “Women arise!” and throw off traditional conceptions of domesticity. 59

Advertisements in the newspaper dangled modern portraits before Singaporean women,

58 SCEL, 1935-1936, 27.

59 “Nü renmen, qilai!” Sin Chew Jit Poh, October 5, 1935.
as they depicted Chinese ladies outside mixing with men, or—if inside—creating lavish, Western-style homes for their nuclear families.⁶⁰

Yet conflicting messages were just beneath the surface. An essay calling for women’s liberation would be placed next to an advertisement for a resort that promised the availability of women who would cater to a male customer’s every desire. Newspaper articles with titles such as, “Women Should Work!” were complemented in subsequent issues with “The Modern Chinese Girl: A Model Wife and Perfect Mother.”⁶¹

Advertisements were frequently ambiguous. In one popular promotion, for instance, a woman was clad in a bathing suit and standing on a horse. At one level, the image could be interpreted as a bold visual representation of a modern woman. On another level, however, the woman simply appeared like a circus performer.⁶² Not long before the advertisement appeared, May Wong, an American born Chinese, had visited Singapore. She noted that no women were on the streets or even in the markets. When she entered a restaurant by herself she received curious stares until she overheard someone remind everyone else, “The circus is in town.”⁶³ Her action, like the advertisement, was socially acceptable only insofar as it could be relegated to a fringe character.

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⁶² Sin Chew Jit Poh, October 19, 1935.

⁶³ May Wong, interview, access number 000093, reel 8, National Archives of Singapore.
In whatever format it was delivered, the implicit message communicated to Chinese women was as clear as it was impossible to adopt in practice: women in Singapore were to become modern without disrupting tradition.

Women freed themselves from that double bind, however, by joining an evangelistic team. God commanded them to move outside of domestic places and into the public sphere. The words of Mark 16:15 were more than an adornment on the cover of the first publication produced by the teams; they were a divine permission slip for women to create new modern identities. God ordered them to “Go and preach the gospel to all peoples.”

**Saved to Serve**

As women joined evangelistic teams, they were not only neutralizing various pressures, but they were actively constructing and embodying a new, modern way of life. By organizing evangelistic teams, women, who had for centuries been identified almost exclusively as daughter, wife, or mother, were now also recognized for their modern role functions to which they were elected: team leader, secretary, and treasurer. Likewise, women’s creative efforts to meet their own financial costs for evangelism allowed many

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64 *SCEL, 1935-36.*

team members to attain powers previously unknown.\textsuperscript{66} Having disposable money meant that numerous women entered the public sphere of economic exchange for the first time—even if in a limited fashion.\textsuperscript{67} Women’s roles were changing.

Women used their teams to assume new public positions as evangelists, whether through their preaching, teaching, singing, or prayer. Being part of a team also meant internalizing and spreading a modern form of individualistic piety. These new positions, piety, and public presence through preaching and evangelism were all but first signs of the modern identity Christian women were forging for themselves in Singapore.\textsuperscript{68}

Piety

Revival choruses indelibly marked the language, and therefore the piety, of female evangelistic teams. Words and phrases from John Sung’s chorus book, used by all the teams, seeped into reports and were borrowed to express spiritual longings. The music played a formative role in shaping women’s piety, and their new self-understanding.

Revival choruses saturated the evangelistic bands. Women sang choruses before going out to evangelize; they sang them to attract curious crowds. Women introduced

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{66 Women in Chinese society seldom had direct access to financial resources. According to May Wong, the American born Chinese lady who visited Singapore in the early 1930s, men even did the shopping for fruits and vegetables, because they controlled all the money (May Wong, interview, access number 000093, reel 8, National Archives of Singapore). That context inspired the Communists’ first piece of legislation passed on May 1, 1950: “Both husband and wife shall have equal rights in the possession and management of family property.” See, Judith Thornberry, “Women in China,” \textit{Church and Society} 65, no. 3 (January-February, 1975): 42.}
\footnote{67 SCEL, 1935-36, 77.}
\footnote{68 Ibid.}
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choruses before and even during their preaching in order to capture the essence of their message. They also used them to welcome a new convert, comfort themselves in the face of rejection, or express jubilation.

The revival chorus books snatched up by the women at Sung’s revival were filled with intensely personal expressions of devotion. Songs led women to call out, “For me! For me! Christ died upon the cross. He suffered, bled and died alone, His suff’rings were for me, for me, for me.”69 Other songs instilled confidence in one’s personal capacity: “I can, I will, I do believe.”70 This modern form of individualistic piety was in some measure offset by the fact that women sang the songs not only alone, but also together as a group. Nonetheless, revivalism’s assumptions about individualism and voluntarism were repeatedly presented as the norm.71

The emphasis the songs placed on home also empowered the women to extend the domestic sphere into the world. Sung’s converts sang with assurance that heaven was now their home.72 As they did so, they relativized their earthly homes. Female evangelists were no longer inside people (neiren), bound by definition to their houses. Instead, revived women were inside-Christ people. They could venture into parks and markets, or

69 Fenxing Duangeji [Revival Choruses], in SCEL, 1946, 183ff., song number 118.

70 Ibid., song number 42.

71 Bruce, 95. Camp meeting revival choruses were “highly redundant and quite brief.” Their structure and brevity meant that camp meeting songs could convey only a small amount of information. What they taught, therefore, were only “those matters about which the community was in substantial agreement.” Redundancy and brevity were hallmarks of Sung’s choruses as well, and the cumulative message was that each individual could and should choose for salvation.

72 Bruce, 96, has argued that “all [revival choruses] were expressions of the assurance of salvation felt by the singers.”
stand on the streets. According to revivalistic piety, such places were as much home as a woman’s house. For, if she was already spiritually home, then physical spaces no longer needed to bind her. If anything, she needed to help the lost find their way to the home she had recently come to occupy. Chinese women in Singapore did not use the same reasoning for domesticating the public sphere as women had used in the United States or Europe in the nineteenth century, but the method was familiar. They extended the horizon of their domestic enclosures to include the broader society.73

It was the chorus book, therefore, which acted as the crucial medium for passing on to women a new spiritual vocabulary. It played a decisive role in creating their revivalistic and socially active piety. An evangelistic team of women rejoiced, therefore, when during one of their campaigns, “forty Bibles were sold, and 300 hymnals.”74 They were undisturbed by the obvious disproportion, for the chorus books were not only less expensive, but as the unique possession of Sung’s evangelistic teams, they were the central device for instilling revivalism’s modern form of spirituality.75 Thus, when a

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74 SCEL, 1935-36, 10.

75 Russell Richey, “Revivalism: In Search of a Definition,” Wesleyan Theological Journal 28, no. 1-2 (1993): 165-175. Richey has convincingly argued that revivalism is a modern phenomenon. Unlike revivals or revitalization, which have a longer history, revivalism is a particular form of religious activity that is built on movements and assumptions that are associated with the modern world. Pietism and voluntarism would be two primary examples of revivalism’s connection to modernity.
woman converted through the ministry of an evangelistic band, her transformation was condensed into saying she “prayed and studied the songs.” The chorus book, even more than the Bible, was the formative document of the movement. Women were able to extract from it the language necessary to describe the momentous shifts transpiring in their personal lives.

Public Appearances

While women who joined evangelistic teams embraced a new piety, the real novelty of their Christian identity was in their conspicuous spread across Singapore. Almost every team was based in the urban core with members living somewhere close to the busy harbor, but groups were never confined there. As female teams moved out, some shared the gospel publicly. They confronted people at temples or in parks; they preached in the streets. One team operated by designating a different member each week to select any destination she wished. The team would then send out one or two members to explore the place, and make contact with people in the area in order to prepare the neighborhood for the full team’s arrival a day or two later. The plan was

76 Ibid., 36.
77 The Singapore Christian Evangelistic League gathered copious information about its teams, including addresses.
78 It must be noted that teams were not necessarily gender exclusive. Some women were part of male-led teams, and several males—most likely boys who were children of female team members—traveled with predominantly women’s team. Nevertheless, most teams led by women had female membership. See, Tay Poh Luan (Mrs.), interview, February 27, 2000, access number 002239, reel 3, National Archives of Singapore.
79 SCEL, 1935-1936, 45.
80 SCEL, 1935-36, 32.
well suited for spreading into unfamiliar territory, something many women did often. Such teams reported traveling to rural areas and outlying islands. In their reports on such trips, women described these peripheral zones as especially superstitious and beholden to written charms or idols, suggesting that for Singaporean women their urban/modern identity was intertwined with their Christian identity.\textsuperscript{81} They believed it was incumbent upon them, therefore, to take the gospel from the modern city to the hinterlands of the earth.

Despite the highly visible evangelistic efforts of such groups, other female teams were more reluctant to enter open spaces. They preferred to evangelize inside homes, hospitals, anti-drug associations or in shops, accommodating cultural expectations that proper women should be inside.\textsuperscript{82} Nonetheless, their piety, preaching, and evangelism were still instilling a new identity. Revivalistic evangelicalism and modernity were merging together.

**Preaching and Teaching**

Whether in recognizably public or private spaces, women were proclaiming the gospel. They frequently reported it as “lecturing,” though sometimes the word “preaching” slipped into their vocabulary.\textsuperscript{83} They were announcing the Good News. They normally began with the story of the Prodigal Son. In part, women used the story to

\textsuperscript{81} *SCEL 1935-36*, see for example, 32, 39, 43-4, and 47.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., for a variety of examples of how and where women evangelized inside, see, 17; 24-25; 46-47.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., Compare, for example, the report of Team 3, a men’s team, with similar female accounts from teams 20 and 29: 14, 17, 25-6.
address undesirable behaviors in men. Gambling, in which more than 200,000 yuan could pass through hands each day, almost entirely in small sums, was an acute family issue, as was prostitution, and opium addiction. Women could easily link the actions of many men in Singapore with the reprobate choices of the Prodigal Son. Yet, the story appealed to women as well, as it described how the immigrant/sinner could finally return home. The gospel they preached was not only a rebuke to destructive behavior, but also an invitation to be saved, a chance to go home.

But in their sermons or lectures, women often ventured further. Their messages had particular nuances that distinguished them from male sermons. For instance, Team 9, composed of men, stated:

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84 It is worth noting that revivalism and social reform have an intertwined history, and women have frequently stood at the intersection. Reforming male society became the task and burden for a number of women inspired by nineteenth-century holiness revivalism in the United States. One suspects that something similar was happening in Singapore in the wake of Sung’s revivals, especially as both tended to focus on male vices that disrupted the home and threatened social cohesion. Women in both revivals felt it incumbent to create a new community. See: Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957); Bruce, 47; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Nancy A. Hardesty, “Minister as Prophet? Or as Mother? Two Nineteenth Century Models,” in *Women in New Worlds*, vol. 1, edited by Hilah F. Thomas and Rosemarky Skinner Keller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1981), 97.

85 Elliott, 21. It is interesting to note that some female teams worked with anti-drug associations. Churches avoided collaborating with Chinese organizations in Singapore that battled opium, in part because the nationalist language of the associations made Western missions uncomfortable and possibly in part because the denominations were dependent on the tax revenue generated by the sale of the drug for the support of their Christian schools. Since the Evangelistic League was neither affiliated with Western denominations nor had ambitions for starting a school, teams may have been free to forge new bonds against the sale and use of opium among Chinese immigrants. See, also, Robert Hunt, “The Churches and Social Problems,” in *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History*, edited by Robert Hunt, Lee Kam Ing, and John Roxborough (Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1992).


87 *SCEL, 1935-36*, see, for example, 25, 28, 43, 55, 58 for illustrative examples.
We often preached the following themes: (A) God is the creator of the universe; (B) Humanity has sinned, but God sent his only Son to pay the price for humanity’s sin; and (C) Preached that only by believing in Jesus Christ will people be able to give up wickedness and return to righteousness…  

A women’s report from the same page, on the other hand, did not attempt to recreate the narrative of creation, fall, and redemption through a series of sermons. They contentedly reported that, “Our message was the loving and gracious God,” a theme they believed could “illumine the hearts of the listeners and cause them to trust, believe and be saved.” Female teams also went beyond the stock evangelistic message of sin and redemption, and included sermons on topics such as Ruth’s love for her mother-in-law, Naomi. On one hand, the content of such a message affirmed traditional Chinese domestic values with its emphasis on the daughter-in-law submitting to the mother-in-law. On the other hand, the act of a woman preaching any sermon undermined all domestic values, as women went outside their homes to spread the gospel. Venturing into preaching/lecturing held contradictions for women, even as it solidified their modern identities.

**Evangelism**

The stated goal of all this preaching was to make converts. The number of people reached by all the evangelistic teams during their first six months is impossible to determine. Based solely on the hard numbers supplied, the Singapore Christian

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88 Ibid., 17.

89 Ibid.
Evangelistic League held 780 services in and around Singapore with 40,429 people listening.\textsuperscript{90} Since many reports were incomplete, a better estimate would probably double both figures. Teams impressively canvassed the island’s 450,000 Chinese immigrants, declaring to all who would listen that Jesus saves.

The women met mixed reactions. Curious, if somewhat mocking, observers gathered easily enough to watch the spectacle of women in uniforms marching through streets, waving flags and singing songs. Yet an audience’s attention was difficult to maintain. People could easily wander off halfway through a sermon. Stiffer opposition was not uncommon: sermons were derailed by listeners who argued with the message, or by whispers that Chiang Kai-shek forbade people to follow Christ.\textsuperscript{91} On an outlying island, inhabitants refused to allow women, who came without a male chaperone, to disembark from their boat.\textsuperscript{92} Children were more receptive, but the women evangelists reported being cautious: “We also sometimes taught little kids to sing hymns but only after we watched for the right time, and then made a move.”\textsuperscript{93} Teams tried to remain optimistic, but disappointment surfaced as women recognized “evangelizing and planting seeds is hard.”\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{90} \textit{SCEL, 1935-36.}

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 47. This charge was particularly interesting, because Z. T. Kuang of the Southern Methodist Church had baptized Chiang Kai-shek in 1930. The event, however, was not publicized in China as the newspapers were under strict military censorship. See: “Chiang Kai Shek: Why He Became a Christian,” \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, January 10, 1931, 7.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{SCEL, 1935-1936.}

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 50.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 44.
Nevertheless, after just six months 961 people, or 2.5% of those who heard teams speak, responded in some positive way to the evangelistic message. Among those who expressed interest in the gospel, evangelistic teams discovered they had almost always followed some prior inroad to their listener’s heart. Teams learned, for example, that if a person had been exposed to the Christian message beforehand, she was far more likely to show interest in the gospel. Converts, therefore, were disproportionately represented by people who had gone to Christian schools in China, those who had grown up Roman Catholic, or persons who had formerly attended church.95 Female evangelists also generated converts through family connections—when they existed in Singapore.96 Lin Youcai, for example, convinced her mother-in-law Xu Yanniang to abolish her idols, and likewise converted her father-in-law shortly thereafter. Another member in the same team convinced her younger sister to abandon witchcraft and follow Jesus.97 Since most people in Singapore, however, did not have ready access to their extended families, they maximized other social relations. When a team travelled to the village of Wanli on a distant island, for instance, they stayed with acquaintances and relied on them as translators in order to testify to the Good News. By operating through pre-existing relationships, the team saw remarkable results. Sixty-six people were converted, approximately ten percent of all the Chinese in that community.98 The pattern was clear:

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95 Ibid., 10, 27, 33, 38, 45.
96 Ibid., 33-4.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid., 10.
female teams utilized networks already present to spread the gospel. Cold calls and street preaching never produced as many new Christians as did spreading the gospel through personal relationships and across social networks.\textsuperscript{99} Since women generally eschewed the former, with most female teams preferring more intimate settings with family and friends, they witnessed twice as many conversions as their male counterparts. Energized by the steadily rising tide of converts, (Leona) Wu Jingling created a mathematical formula proving that if teams and their converts continued to make new converts, then the entire world would be converted to Christ in twenty-five years.\textsuperscript{100} For a while, at least, female evangelistic teams were believed to be a popular spiritual movement that was transforming the world.

**Legacy**

Optimism about the movement’s future, however, was premature. The Singapore Christian Evangelistic League soon lost momentum. Several forces contributed to its decline. First, by requiring female teams to engage in certain evangelistic practices, both the sharp rise in women’s voluntary religious commitment and their assumption of modern gender roles were normalized, and the energy that animated the extraordinary movement slowly dissipated. The teams could have potentially renewed enthusiasm within the organization by incorporating new converts or by starting new teams, but

\textsuperscript{99} Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), described something similar in the United States. Women were very effective in using "maternal evangelism" to lead family and friends to a conversion.

\textsuperscript{100} Xinjiapo jidujiao budaotuan yingxi jiniankan [Singapore Christian Evangelistic League, Silver Anniversary, 1960], (Singapore: 1960), 1.
because of a lengthy and complicated order of salvation, those who did respond to the gospel were generally excluded from joining. For instance, despite the fact that one woman had, “ceased to worship idols, and now prays every day…[and] has led other people to hear the message,” the team that evangelized her still prayed that the “Holy Spirit [would] open the eyes of her heart, so that soon she will turn to the Lord and become a citizen of heaven.” To them she did not appear converted, even if “She enjoys progressing in the way of the Lord.”

More and more teams faded away as the months passed, with few replacements able to join the diminished ranks. At its apex, 111 teams simultaneously marched out of the Telok Ayer Methodist Church at the end of one of John Sung’s services and filled Singapore with testimonies to Jesus Christ. Three months later, the number of operating teams was closer to 50. By the time the Japanese invaded the island on February 15, 1942 the emaciated organization “imperceptibly and quietly came to a standstill.”

Second, although the League reconvened after the war, it was never again a truly popular movement. Numbers remained down, and the tone of members’ testimonies understandably shifted from highly wound evangelistic zeal to exhausted sighs of relief that the occupation was over. Furthermore, Singapore had changed in the decade since evangelistic teams first canvassed the island. Women could now find alternative ways to

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101 SCEL, 1935-36, 51.
102 SCEL, 1946, 83.
103 Ibid.
settle into a modern society. The demands of post-war reconstruction, for example, helped women solidify their acceptance as part of the modern workforce. Evangelistic teams were no longer necessary social innovators.

Third, when the American fundamentalist Carl McIntire visited Singapore a few years after the war, he invited the Evangelistic League to join his International Council of Christian Churches. Although not a church itself, the League was nonetheless drawn by McIntire’s vehement denunciation of the liberalism in the World Council of Churches, a theological poison of which John Sung had warned his converts.\(^{104}\) Shortly thereafter, on March 18, 1950, the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League voted to affiliate with the ICCC.\(^{105}\) When the majority of churches in Singapore rejected similar invitations and chose to cooperate with the WCC instead, the Evangelistic League was almost entirely isolated. Its strict policy of separation from WCC affiliates meant that the Evangelistic League, which had originally leavened many Protestant denominations, withdrew into a small enclave, only forging a direct relationship with the Singapore Bible Presbyterian Church. In their seclusion, the surviving evangelistic teams became marginal to Singaporean Protestant Christianity.

For a brief time, however, women made the evangelistic teams, which had coalesced out of John Sung’s catalytic revival in 1935, a modernizing spiritual

\(^{104}\) Ibid., i.

movement. The teams integrated significant numbers of female immigrants into a new family, an alternative home. They provided spiritual refuge, as women escaped the charge of being “superstitious” by becoming Christians. They also helped women resolve anxieties about their gender roles by giving them divine sanction to assume modern female identities. In addition, Sung’s revival equipped women to extend the concept of home into the public sphere, and thereby released them to move around Singapore and beyond proclaiming the gospel and spreading revival across pre-existing networks. Through their efforts, Christianity did not become the dominant religion among the Chinese in Singapore, but religious affiliations were nonetheless altered. Despite the female demographic deficit, Christianity became and still remains the only religion in Singapore in which Chinese women outnumber men. In their new faith, women not only found a modern spiritual home, but through their evangelistic teams they also prepared an attractive religious option for future generations of Chinese women.

**Conclusion**

The outcome may not have been entirely what Sung expected, but he never distanced himself from what the revived women of Singapore did. On the contrary, he visited the leadership whenever he was in the city, and wrote warm letters to them in his absence. To him, the women were soldiers of the cross; they were not the modern militants of whom he was suspicious. To the women, Sung was the surrogate father of

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their new spiritual family. He had provided the vision of a new home, and dared to commission them to spread the gospel. The relationship was marked by mutual affection, just as the creation of the evangelistic teams as a modernizing force had been a mutual affair.
CHAPTER FIVE
INDIGENIZATION:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF JOHN SUNG’S HEALING MINISTRY

On May 21, 1936, Chen Rongzhan attended a Christian revival service in order to capture part of what happened during “One Day in China.” In the essay he submitted to be published alongside 468 others, which cumulatively tried to document the scope of what happened in China on that given day, Chen likened John Sung to a “traveling medicine peddler.”1 Intriguingly, Chen said virtually nothing about Sung’s sermon, but twice in his brief essay he drew comparisons between Sung and the itinerant medicine sellers who were active in China’s towns and cities.2 Of course, one can easily detect the condescension in his description. Chen submitted his essay, after all, to be published as a depiction of China’s “superstition.” But what is not so easily dismissed is his decision to cast Sung as a type of medical practitioner. The fast-talking revivalist did not awaken in him associations with other preachers, or even teachers of the Dharma. Chen may have doubted the efficacy of what Sung and other medical hucksters had to offer, but, like so many others in Republican China, he understood Sung to be first and foremost a kind of healer.


Since that time, some have muted Chen’s observation and have intentionally downplayed the prominence of Sung’s healing ministry; more recently, Lian Xi has elevated Sung’s “magic of healing” as a factor in his success.3 No one, however, has given Sung’s work of divine healing sustained attention. This chapter will deal with that lacuna. It will start by describing the context in which Sung’s healing services began: the shifting medical landscape in China at the beginning of the 1930s. The second section will trace the various influences that shaped Sung’s own healing ministry. The third part will isolate when Sung’s healing services began, and then describe how he performed them. In the final pages, the question of indigenization will be addressed. Sung, this chapter argues, did not indigenize his practice of healing, but his pursuit of healing. In the midst of medical pluralism, Sung had no need to mimic or adjust to any one system. His practice of Christian healing easily crowded in alongside Western biomedicine, Chinese National medicine, and an assortment of folk and religious healing alternatives. It was only when he became deathly sick that he had to modify his pursuit of health. He could no longer adhere strictly to his own medical prescriptions, but began looking for relief—like almost everyone else in China—wherever it could be found.

3 Lian Xi, Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 10.
The Healing Arts in Republican China

Western Biomedicine

The missionaries who introduced Western biomedicine to China were not entering medically vacant territory. A thriving medical marketplace existed in China, and the missionaries were forced to find their own niche in that economy. In the nineteenth century, early missionary doctors found that they could corner the market on surgeries, as Confucian filial piety made the idea of cutting the human body, which was a gift from one’s parents, abhorrent to Chinese medical practitioners. Despite the cultural injunctions against operations, missionary doctors had success in treating medical problems like cataracts, which led to an increased demand for such services.4

Doctors trained in Western biomedicine multiplied rapidly in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The presence of medical missionaries grew from 19 in 1881 to 462 by 1920—a 2,300% increase in less than forty years. The number of Chinese doctors trained in biomedicine also ballooned. In 1909, the country had only four hundred students learning Western medicine, almost all of whom studied abroad.5 A few decades later thousands had supplemented the ranks of those early graduates. In 1927,


China had 3,000 doctors trained in Western medicine, and 9,000 by 1937. The rise of Western medicine appeared meteoric.

Even so, the increasing number of doctors trained in biomedicine paled in comparison with China’s enormous population. In the 1930s England had a ratio of doctors using biomedicine to the general population that was 1 in 1500, and in the United States it was 1 in 800. China, on the other hand, had only one doctor trained in Western medicine for every 80,000 people in the country. The disproportion was even further imbalanced by the fact that almost all doctors trained in Western medicine settled in China’s relatively few urban centers. Shanghai alone accounted for almost a quarter of all biomedical doctors in the nation. Thus, the impact of Western medicine on the general population was uneven. In the cities, where the density of biomedical experts was highest, Western medicine was visible, and its ideas about diagnosing and treating illnesses found powerful cultural allies among the urban elite.

By the 1920s there was a general consensus among urban Marxist radicals, pro-Western liberals, and conservative nationalists that “‘science’ had to play a leading role in twentieth-century China, if there was to be a China in the twentieth century.” All these

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6 Croizier, *Traditional Medicine in Modern China*, 48.


9 Jewell, 49.

10 Croizier, *Traditional Medicine in Modern China*, 1.
advocates for science may have had different interpretations of what that word meant, but each was fully committed to science as a means of modernizing the nation. These urban intellectuals vigorously promoted their scientific ideals, producing over 400 periodicals “devoted to propagating the ideas of scientism.”

Zealots of science enthusiastically promoted Western biomedicine. “Every body knows that modern China needs science. Modern medicine,” opined a university student, “is a branch of science, whereas ‘old style’ medicine is but a fool’s philosophy.” Other intellectuals likewise heaped scorn upon Chinese medicine. Chen Duxiu, editor of *New Youth*, spurned traditional healing practices for their incompatibility with science. In an essay published in 1915 he explained: “Our doctors don’t understand science…. They only talk about the five elements, their production and elimination, heat and cold, *yin* and *yang*, and prescribe medicine accordingly to the old formulae.” He deplored the grim state of affairs in China, wherein “Our men of learning do not understand science; thus they…confuse the world and delude the people.” A professor of psychiatry at the Peking Union Medical College, the leading biomedical facility in Asia, went further. Not

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13 Ralph Croizier, *Traditional Medicine in Modern China*, 71-72, quoting Chen Duxiu, “Call to Youth,” *Xin qing nian* [New Youth] 1, no. 6 (September 15, 1915).

only were patients who turned to traditional healing methods confused and deluded, their persistent beliefs in non-scientific methods were potentially a sign of psychological illness.¹⁵

Chinese medicine fared no better in literature. Lu Xun, one of China’s most celebrated authors, depicted Chinese medical practices darkly in his short story, “Medicine.” Parents of a young man, who appeared to be dying of tuberculosis, acquired for him a special Chinese medicine at considerable cost: a bun dipped in human blood. The boy ate the sure-cure, but died. With little subtlety the story not only attacked the ineffectiveness of Chinese medicine, but it also linked it to a kind of cannibalism. Choosing to use Chinese medicine instead of Western biomedicine was akin to drinking the life-blood out of the nation.¹⁶

Indeed, champions of Western biomedicine believed the life of the nation was precisely what was at stake. In an essay contest put on by the Shanghai Association for Hygiene Education, students were asked to submit essays in English or Chinese in answer to the question, “‘Old Style’ Versus ‘Modern’ Medicine in China: Which Can Do More For the Health and Progress of the Country, and Why?”¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the judges, most of whom were trained in Western biomedicine, awarded prizes to those who

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¹⁷ The English wording clarified the association’s bias. “Old Style,” was their English translation of *zhongyi*, literally “Chinese medicine”.
recognized that “Education gives the base, and industry the efficiency of a strong nation, but only the development of the physical health of the individual will raise her to a standard high enough to save China from the fate of the great empires that now enthuse the excavator and the archeologist.”\(^{18}\) The essay, cast in stark social Darwinist terms, ended, “For the benefit of the individual, of society, and of China, ‘modern’ medicine should be adopted without hesitation.”\(^{19}\) Another winner pointed out that, “The hollow-breasted and humpbacked, the pale-faced and slender-limbed ... the award of the very title of ‘The Far Eastern Sick Person’ [are] ... direct gifts of the old-style medicine to China.”\(^{20}\) It was urgent for the nation to adopt “modern” medicine. In a world where only the fittest would survive, China could not rely on “old-style” doctors to save the nation. Only Western biomedicine held out hope for the country.

This was more than nationalistic rhetoric. The very ideas these intellectuals were writing about became embedded in urban advertisements. Kiazin, for example, was a Western-style chemotherapy for tuberculosis and other ailments. Advertisements for the drug depicted a Chinese man bound and gagged; he was a prisoner. Who imprisoned him


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Chang Tsung-Liang, 9.
was intentionally vague, but the product’s byline promised that Kiazin could return vigor to the patient and to the nation as a whole.21

As biomedicine merged with the Chinese nationalism it gained a potent political ally. The cultural elites, who ardently professed that Chinese nationalism was dependent on a citizenry that was made healthy and strong by Western medicine, convinced the Nationalist government to turn to Western-trained doctors for guidance when it set up the first Ministry of Health in China’s history. At the first National Health Conference held in 1929, chaired by the department’s vice-minister Liu Ruiheng, graduate of Harvard Medical School and former researcher at John Hopkins University, the prominence of Western biomedicine within the Nationalist government became exceedingly clear. The delegate Yu Yunxiu, President of the Shanghai Branch of the Chinese Medical and Pharmaceutical Association, proposed “to abolish the old style practice in order to remove the obstacles to medicine and public health.”22 The proposal went on to outline how traditional medical associations would be abolished, and newspapers and magazines would be prohibited from publishing “reactionary views” or “unscientific propaganda” (i.e., advertisements for traditional medicine). The document also suggested that those who practiced medicine in China would need to study Western medicine, and complete that course of study within three years, in order to be given a medical license.


All who failed to comply would be banned from plying their trade. In other words, the Ministry of Health—stacked with people trained in Western biomedicine—unanimously voted to eliminate its medical competitors. Biomedicine, they reasoned, was going to make China strong and well again.\textsuperscript{23}

**Chinese Medicine**

Medical practitioners not trained in Western-medicine appeared to be easy targets for modernizing nationalists. Their status in society was already tenuous. For centuries, physicians had appeared in Chinese theatre in the role of *chou*, clown-like characters who provided comic relief. “The sarcasm was aimed at the low level of their medical skills and even lower level of their medical ethics.”\textsuperscript{24} By the end of the nineteenth century, the joke was serious. Their social rank was in precipitous decline. Since licensing was a foreign concept, anyone could claim to be trained in and practice Chinese healing arts. Perhaps for that reason, people who claimed to be physicians skilled in traditional medicine were eyed as greedy hucksters, preying on the ill, known to kill more than to cure.\textsuperscript{25}

The proposal for “Abolishing Old-Style Medicine in Order to Clear Away the Obstacles to Medicine and Public Health,” however, galvanized the diffuse Chinese

\textsuperscript{23} Ye, 199-200; see also: Ralph Croizier, *Traditional Medicine in Modern China*; Andrews, “The Republic of China.”

\textsuperscript{24} Ye, 199.

medical community. In fact, the government plan to eliminate Chinese medicine had the opposite effect. It created guoyi, or National Medicine—what we recognize as Chinese medicine today. In response to the not-too-subtle declaration of war on indigenous medicine, Chinese medical practitioners mobilized opposition. A month after the Ministry of Health unanimously passed a resolution to phase out medical alternatives, the alternatives appeared in Shanghai with force. Two hundred seventy-two representatives descended on the city from over one hundred medical associations across China. Two thousand Chinese-style pharmacies went on strike for half of the day to show their support for the nation’s traditional doctors. The protesting medical community grasped hold of the nationalistic rhetoric employed by those who propagated Western biomedicine, but turned it in a different direction. Western biomedicine, their argument ran, was not the savior of the country, but its enemy. Western biomedicine was part of the imperialist invasion. The government proposal to forbid Chinese medicine, they warned, was a capitulation to the desires of foreign powers to export more of their own drugs. National strength was not found in ideas or healing arts that originated outside the country, but by capitalizing on China’s own medical resources.26

Those gathered in Shanghai founded a nationwide organization of Chinese medical doctors. The name they took for themselves was significant: Institute of National Medicine. Henceforth, they were not going to be associated with “old-style” medicine,

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the English translation of the word zhongyi, literally Chinese medicine. Instead, they would be the country’s National medicine, guoyi. With the language of nationalism in their arsenal, the Institute of National Medicine battled the Ministry of Health to a standstill. The proposal to abolish Chinese medicine never became law.

In order to come to a stalemate, however, the Institute of National Medicine did have to concede to other demands. It became necessary for Chinese doctors to gain credibility for their art by testing it against science. This was more difficult than early enthusiasts anticipated. Science was understood to be secular, but so much of Chinese medicine was rooted in a religious cosmology. Evil spirits could be excised from Chinese medical etiology, but:

In China, healing practices grew from the same roots and paradigms as other versions of Chinese religiosity. Even acupuncture and herbal medicine—ostensibly secular—were grounded in concepts of the body as a microcosm, a miniature version of a cosmos, composed of the same vital psychophysical stuff called qi…. The world, indeed the cosmos, constituted a sacred network, wherein the “ten thousand things”—all of reality—comprised the triad of Heaven, Earth, and Human Being, all engaged in an ongoing dynamic relationship of co-creation.27

A secular National medicine would be difficult to create.

Everyone agreed that science needed be the instrument that would help secularize Chinese medicine. How to use it, though, was a challenge. It was difficult to explain the theory of the five elements, or five phases, in scientific or biomedical terminology. Fire, metal, wood, soil, and water were long interconnected in Chinese thought. Fire melts

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metal, metal cuts wood, wood overcomes soil, soil channels water, and water extinguishes fire. They could also be seen as producing one another. Water brings forth trees, wood can create fire, fire produces ashes (soil), soil bears metal, and metal—when heated—emits steam (water). Each element was associated with an organ, and treated accordingly. If the liver (wood), for example, was identified as causing sickness by under-producing, then it could be brought back into balance by stimulating the kidneys (water). If that worked too well and the liver (wood) became overactive, then it required strengthening the lungs (metal) to bring the body back into balance.\textsuperscript{28} How could that fundamental understanding of health and the body be expressed in modern scientific terms?

Chinese doctors did several things as they turned to science for assistance. Some claimed science helped them shed the superstitious accretions that had made Chinese medicine the unstable alloy people despised. This allowed doctors to pick and choose ideas from medical texts. Others tried to reinterpret their medical work in modern language. \textit{Yin} and \textit{yang}, one doctor suggested, actually referred to positive and negative electrical charges.\textsuperscript{29} He argued that Chinese medicine was already scientific, one just needed to see the modern ideas beneath those allegorized in the ancient medical texts. Others found no rapprochement with Western biomedicine. They conceded that Chinese

\textsuperscript{28} Unschuld, 95.

\textsuperscript{29} Croizier, \textit{Traditional Medicine in Modern China}, 97.
medicine was not scientific, but Chinese drugs were. Soon, however, they too ran into difficulties as “Magic and ritual play too large a role in drug formulas to ignore.”

In the end, regardless of the method by which Chinese doctors tried to modernize their practices through science, all of them worked together to standardize and unify their field. Before the twentieth century, multiple healing traditions could have been described as Chinese medicine. The National Medicine Institute, however, symbolized the push to limit Chinese medical pluralism. Medical textbooks were edited to suppress contradictions that led to divergent practices. An “illusion of a so-called Chinese medicine (chung-I [zhongyi]), supposedly well-defined and with theory easily converted to practice” began to emerge in the 1930s.

Nevertheless, Chinese medicine never became a fully integrated body of knowledge during the Republican period (1911-1949). In fact, one Western-style Chinese doctor pointed out the chaotic state of Chinese medicine by referring to what was happening in Shanghai. The city had a Shenzhou Medical Association, the Institute of National Medicine, and the Scholarly doctors. They all promoted different types of traditional healing. He also pointed to shrines, diviners, temples, and sorcerers as sources for treating illness. But in a concession that would have made purveyors of National

30 Ibid., 84-86, 125.


33 Unschuld, 250.
medicine proud, he listed the religious options in a separate category. National medicine was not perfectly unified, but at least it had achieved differentiation from religious forms of Chinese healing.

**Medical Alternatives**

National medicine separated from medical alternatives largely through a process of secularization. At the end of the nineteenth century J. J. M. de Groot, the Dutch sinologist and historian of religion, noted that disease and demons were commonly linked together in China. Daoist priests and shamans, in fact, were “described as physicians and dispensers of medicines.” Another foreign observer, John Shryock, explained that in the city of Anqing Chinese physicians and dealers in medicinal drugs congregated at a local temple. Sickness and healing were generally understood as intertwined with larger spiritual or cosmic forces.

The attempt to make National medicine scientific pulled traditional medicine and religion apart. Some National medicine theorists in the twentieth century, for example, began to emphasize one particular strain of Chinese medical thought. They focused exclusively on illnesses caused by “internal” imbalances. Health, from this perspective, was achieved through homeostasis. Balance, however, was difficult to maintain because

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34 Lei, 31.


seasons changed, people aged, food intake varied, and the like. If something became imbalanced from, say, eating too many cold foods, then the problem could be overcome by ingesting materia medica that possessed hot properties.\textsuperscript{37} The important thing, in terms of secularization, was that the doctors who focused on “internal” imbalances did not need to be concerned with “external” imbalances—those spiritual forces that tradition taught could also cause illness. “Internal” imbalances did not cover all of Chinese medical thought, but at least they could exclude the supernatural ideas generally abhorrent to modern science.

Perhaps for China’s educated elite a freshly secularized National medicine that dealt only with “internal” imbalances was a sufficient alternative to Western biomedicine. However, as Sherman Cochran has rightly emphasized, most Chinese people never reduced their healing options to just those two categories.\textsuperscript{38} Sick people appreciated that they had other choices to which they could turn. Bonesetter shops continued to adorn China’s streets. Family potions and other do-it-yourself techniques remained popular. The twentieth century also saw the proliferation of quackery. New potions and nostrums were hawked on the streets. For the more sophisticated, tonics and elixirs were packaged in Western-looking prescription bottles with English labels, but the explanations on the

\textsuperscript{37} Chinese medical ideas about hot and cold usually linked to things ingested, but should not be interpreted as a reflection of temperature or spiciness—ideas associated in English with hot and cold foods. “[W]e are dealing with concepts, no simple direct sensations…” Nathan Sivin, the great historian of Chinese medicine, reminded his readers. Nathan Sivin, \textit{Traditional Medicine in Contemporary China} (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies University of Michigan, 1987), 182.

labels spoke in traditional medical idioms (bodily orbs, for instance, rather than organs). Acupuncture, which modernized only after adopting Western anatomy in the 1930s, was also practiced separately from Western and National medicine. The heated and well-documented battle between Western and Chinese medicine should not obscure the alternatives.

Religious healing, in particular, remained extremely popular in Republican China. When National medicine chose to focus only on “internal” causes, patients simply turned to other forms of healing when “external” factors, like fate or ghosts, were suspected. Paul Unschuld concluded at the end of his magisterial review of Chinese medical history that “Demonological healing was the most influential system” in China. The number of people who pursued religious healing, therefore, dwarfed those who visited doctors of either the Western or National type.

To seek religious healing in the 1930s, however, was to enter something of a black market. In the late 1920s, the Nationalists began to use propaganda to curb religious healing. They produced a new song:

The Chinese Kuomintang cares for the people’s ills
We see this dread disease and administer a cure
We’ve written these words to show you many evils
In hopes our comrades soon will from delusion wake.

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39 Ibid., 67.
41 Unschuld, 216.
The song then proceeded to attack geomancers, fortunetellers, and healing ritual specialists as purveyors of lies. A bit later, the state’s ambitious *weisheng yundong* [Hygiene Movement] also targeted religious professionals who performed healing rituals and dispensed supernatural medicines. Those who administered religious healing were accused of being peddlers of superstition and, therefore, enemies of the state. The propaganda, however, turned to suppression in the 1930s when the KMT went so far as to try and ban “divination, geomancy, mediumistic ritual, folk healing, and even the use of spirit money and firecrackers.”

In 1930, for example, the KMT tried to eliminate the popular belief that health was directly connected to fate. The state aggressively renewed its efforts to enforce the *guoli*, the relatively new national calendar that was based on the Gregorian calendar. It had been adopted by the Republic of China soon after the revolution in 1911, but state officials complained that after almost twenty years, “Most of society doesn’t even know what the national calendar is.” By contrast, the *feili*, the traditional Chinese calendar, remained important to most people, because it did much more than mark time:

The fundamental premise of [the *feili* calendar] was an ordered universe in which the unseen forces of *yin* and *yang*, the so-called five ‘phases’ or ‘activities’ (*wuxing*, identified with the ‘elements’ earth, wood, fire, water and metal), the eight trigrams of the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes), the ten ‘heavenly stems’ (*tiangan*) and twelve ‘earthly branches’ (*dizhi*) of the ancient segenary numbering system, and a host of other cosmic variables—including both ‘real’ stars and ‘star-spirits’—interacted with each other.

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43 Ibid., 194.
44 Ibid., 230.
and resonated with ‘like things’ (tonglei). In this interconnected universe of cosmic resonance, fate was knowable.45

Consulting a calendar was an important practice used to control one’s health. The cosmos was always in flux. Relationships changed over seasons and years. Society was continually altered by births, marriages, and deaths. These shifts could potentially throw a person out of balance, that is, they could make someone sick.46 Thus, it was important to consult fortunetellers—or at least an almanac—in order to know what to do or, more significantly, what to avoid. Through the 1930s, the state urged people to “make your own fate,” but the ubiquity of feili almanacs and the persistent presence of fortunetellers on the streets indicated that most people chose to manage their fate rather than make it. The government simply could not curb the popular technique for staying healthy.47

In fact, the Nationalist attacks on “superstition” repeatedly failed. For all the money and effort put into propaganda, the weak state’s declaration of war against religious healing was a statement of intent rather than fact. Virtually no religious healer was arrested, save a handful who had become fabulously rich through their services.48 Religious healing was too diffuse and too popular in Republican China to be successfully uprooted. In cities where the state operated medical facilities open to the public, officials


47 Nedostup, 231.

48 Ibid., 218.
groused: “when people are sick or have some matter they cannot figure out, they go to diviners or those who understand the spirits, and make their decisions through prayer, consulting divination sticks, fortune reading, or diagramming characters.” The market for religious healing was robust despite state opposition.

Temples continued to do a flourishing business in healing through the 1930s. Of course not everyone who visited a temple did so for medical reasons, but the overwhelming majority did. C. K. Yang discovered in his study of Religion in Chinese Society that in some places 96.8% of all requests made in temples were for the healing of disease. This could happen through prayer to any deity, for all Chinese gods could potentially be healers.

A person at a temple might also seek more information from the gods about the sickness, or the course it would take, by picking up a container that held one hundred numbered bamboo sticks. The container was shaken until one stick fell out, and when taken to a clerk in the temple, a piece of paper with that number would be pulled out. “What is the nature of the inquiry?” the attendant would ask. Each paper contained different answers, depending on whether the seeker wanted information on business, pregnancy, moving, lost goods, marriage, rainfall, or health. If a person had a question about health, the appropriate sentence was read. If the divine response was unclear, as the

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cryptic sentences often were, then the attendant could provide his or her own elaboration, helping the person understand the divine message regarding the source or course of a disease.\(^{51}\)

Shamans were the other religious healing option available in temples. They specialized in channeling a deity while in a trance. Those seeking healing could approach a god through the shaman to gain help with any illness caused by “external” forces such as ghosts. When the god spoke to the supplicant or supplicant’s family, sickness was almost always described as being rooted in larger struggles. Shamans frequently reported that an illness was connected to family conflicts, financial difficulties, personal loss, a period of bad fate, or some other point of deprivation and struggle.\(^{52}\) Sickness belonged to a social rather than a biological reality.

By the 1930s, most urban Chinese people began by treating an illness as if it was an internal imbalance, a problem of the *yang* dimension of life. Only if treating the sickness as such failed to procure the desired outcome did people normally turn to the temple.\(^{53}\) A god, who lived in and had control over the *yin* realm, could see if the troublemaker was external, a malevolent force that was also from the *yin* dimension. A god could normally deal with such spirits. Depending on the diagnosis, the god might

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\(^{53}\) Kleinman, 188-189; Ahern, “Sacred and Secular Medicine in a Taiwan Village,” 28.
recommend making a propitiating offering to the angry spirit, write out a charm—which was an edict from the god to the afflicting spirit that commanded the spirit to leave the sick person alone, or perform an exorcism. None of them were fail-safe cures. The evil spirits, just like their human counterparts, might choose to be greedy and develop an insatiable appetite for offerings, or decide to risk violating the god’s decrees. Even so, people sought divine help for illness and found deep satisfaction doing so. Religious healing, in spite of accusations that its “superstitious” ideas retarded modernization, remained an intractable part of the medical landscape in Republican China.

**The Influences on Sung’s Healing Ministry**

**Medical Pluralism**

Medical care in the Republic of China was extraordinarily eclectic. The nation boasted one of the most advanced biomedical facilities in the entire world (Peking Union Medical College) while at the same time housing thousands of temples where people sought relief from their suffering by casting lots or visiting a shaman. During that brief period in Chinese history, all manner of folk practices flourished—whether religious or secular—as people sought healing. Until the People’s Republic of China began to

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55 Kleinman, 286. In the 1970s, well after the Republic of China (Taiwan) had elevated and solidified Western biomedicine as the preferred way for the people to find healing, many Chinese people reported their highest rates of satisfaction came through religious folk practices.
harmonize the plethora of medical options in the 1950s, Chinese people could select from a surfeit of medical options.56

Most people sampled from the medical buffet. A sick person might visit a missionary hospital for one kind of complaint, and a doctor of National medicine for another. Or, a patient might visit both in hopes that at least one treatment might work. Families could divide. While the patient consulted a dentist, a mother might secretly obtain a charm.57 Records indicate that people changed caregivers regularly. In the 1930s physicians started to express their frustration with such habits. Sick people were urged to become modern patients. In other words, they were to remain loyal to their doctor, and to their doctor’s system of healing.58 However, such calls for total conversion went largely unheeded. If an injection from a biomedical clinic failed to improve one’s health instantly, then a person could be expected to experiment with a blend of herbs from a Chinese pharmacy.59 If one god or a temple failed to produce healing, then a person simply moved to another.60 Almost all patients displayed a pragmatic posture. “What was important was getting better, not discovering what was responsible for getting better,” Arthur Kleinman concluded after observing how Chinese people interacted with their


57 Kleinman, 96; Croizier, Traditional Medicine in Modern China, 41.


59 Kleinman, 194.

diverse medical options. The prevailing attitude was, “All available treatments that might be of help should be tried.” To that end, Chinese people selected their medical options freely:

as freely as their social and financial circumstances permitted—among priests, spirit mediums, magicians, itinerant herbalists and acupuncturists, classical physicians, and other healers. Even the penniless might have had access to acquaintances who knew how to administer herbs gathered in the vicinity, local families who dispensed certain prescriptions for charity, Buddhist priests who cared for the sick and so on.

One medical system did not displace another. Instead, each squeezed in with the next.

The specialists or devotees in one system might decry the inconsistent or irreverent use of their techniques, but for the vast majority of those who sought healing medical multiplicity was the norm.

Initially, John Sung was a product of China’s medical pluralism. When he was 18, and hoping to study in the United States, Sung discovered that trachoma might prevent him from fulfilling his dream. In his short book *Wode jianzheng* [My Testimony], he described how he went to the mission hospital for treatment, and credited the care he received there for allowing him to study abroad. Yet, in the subsequent paragraph, he added that the local barber used a “bone instrument and scraped my eyeballs, and washed and rinsed them until I felt a great amount of comfort. I went to the barber’s several times

61 Kleinman, 333.
62 Ibid.
63 Sivin, 195.
and had had this done, and without medicine my sore eyes were healed.” The two treatments, from Western and Chinese medicine, were received almost simultaneously and were thanked alike.

Later, during his studies in the United States, Sung was hospitalized for an anal fistula. He appreciated the gentle care he received, and in his diary would speak of the marvelous relief he experienced from the ministrations of the doctors and nurses, though, regretfully, the fistula never healed. Perhaps because biomedicine never cured him, he did not confine himself to the hands of physicians trained in Western medicine. Upon his return to China, for example, Sung immediately visited a temple and sought divine help through bamboo sticks.

Although the practice of divination quickly disappeared from his diary, Sung never abandoned the Chinese calendar. Throughout his ministry, he began every day of his journal with two dates: the first was from the National calendar (guoli), the second from the Chinese calendar (feili). Unlike many others, Sung was not interested in using the Chinese calendar to manage his fate. Still, his persistent use of it made him one of the many people in China who frustrated government authorities. The use of two calendars, they had discovered, “enabled people to live in two (or more) worlds at once.”

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66 Song Shangjie, November 14, 1927, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore (henceforth, SSD, TTC).

67 Nedostup, 238.
Sung embodied the overlapping of multiple worlds. He spoke knowingly of the five orbs (organs) of the human body, and organized his diet around hot and cold substances that were believed to affect one’s “internal” balance. Yet, he also praised biomedicine, and enjoyed telling his audience that if he was a woman he would have been a biomedical nurse. Especially before his Christian ministry began, Sung was open to a range of medical care options: Western biomedicine, Chinese folk medicine, and religious healing.

The Holiness Movement and Divine Healing

A noticeable shift happened after Sung became an itinerant evangelist with the Bethel Mission: visits to all health care providers stopped. Sung was not spared from sickness. In fact, he regularly told audiences how various afflictions threatened to undermine his work. In each case, however, the illness was overcome by divine intervention. When he lost his voice, for example, he counterintuitively added more sermons to the day, reasoning that God would be forced to perform a miracle on his

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68 Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi yanjiangji [Text of Dr. Song Shangjie’s Sermon],” Shengjie zhinan yuekan 3, no. 3 (March 1931): 4; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 2 (Singapore: Alice Doo, 1983), 25. Sung was famous for insisting on eating chicken soup after he preached. It was believed to be a hot food—a yang tonic—that could replenish his energy after his frenetic presentations of the gospel. For a fuller glimpse of his menu, see Song Shangjie, April 14-April 27, 1934, Song Shangjie Diaries, Trinity Theological College, Singapore (henceforth, SSD, TTC). Additional information about Sung’s diet can be gleaned from Leslie T. Lyall, A Biography of John Sung (Singapore: Armour, 2005), 105; and Timothy Tow, John Sung My Teacher (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1985), 135.

69 Song Shangjie, Wode jianzheng, 25, 39.

behalf, lest God be ashamed of a silent preacher. At other times, Sung reported that he overcame the temptation to cease his peripatetic life and return home by remembering that each time he saw his family his daughters became sick. God, he reasoned, wanted to keep him moving. A fact confirmed, it seemed, when his girls’ health would rebound upon his departure. Once, Sung became extremely ill, and a colleague trained in Western biomedicine believed he suffered from a weak heart and predicted a dire outcome if Sung continued to work so hard. In response, Sung summoned two friends to pray for him, and as they did so his back “felt extremely hot, like burning fire.” Sung left that place and went on preaching—almost without ceasing—for the next nine years of his life.

With such divine resources at hand, other forms of healing were unnecessary. That did not mean the medical alternatives were bad. At least the numerous physicians trained in Chinese medicine and Western biomedicine, who supported Sung’s ministry, never understood him to say such a thing. It was just that their methods of healing were superseded. In Sung’s mind, relying on human agents for healing was superfluous at best, a sign of faithlessness at worst. In one telling example, Sung rebuked a man who came to be healed of his poor eyesight. Right as Sung stretched out his hands to anoint the supplicant with oil, he caught a glimpse of the man’s glasses in his shirt pocket.

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71 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 91.

72 Song Shangjie, April 14, 1931, SSD, TTC.

73 Twelve percent of those who joined the National Evangelistic League, which sprang out of Sung’s revivals, worked as dentists, pharmacists, nurses, doctors trained in Western biomedicine, or doctors trained in traditional Chinese medicine. See: Song Shangjie, ed., *Quanguo jidutu budaotuan tuankan* [National Christian Evangelistic League Publication] (December 1936).
quickly withdrew his arms and rebuked the supplicant: “You should have thrown [your glasses] away if you really believed!” Human medicine, in any of its various forms, was like those glasses. You could use it as a crutch, but why limp along when God offered total restoration?

Sung’s ideas about healing were birthed and shaped by the holiness movement. It was no accident that Sung’s healing ministry began after he was associated with the Bethel Mission. Jennie Hughes, the co-founder of that work, was deeply embedded in the American holiness movement. Her father, George Hughes, was the editor of the popular holiness periodical *The Guide to Holiness*. The magazine was one of the foremost organs for working out a theology of divine healing, and for publicizing accounts of miraculous cures. The concept occupied a significant amount of space in the magazine, appearing both in articles on the subject, and even more so as testimonials. Before leaving for China, Jennie Hughes had worked for *The Guide to Holiness*, and when she opened the Bethel Mission she started her own version, *Shengjie zhinan* [*Guide to Holiness*].

Jennie Hughes, and the Bethel Mission, continued to promote the importance of divine healing in China. Like others in the holiness movement, those in Bethel saw it as a

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75 See below, “The Start of Sung’s Healing Ministry.”


vital aspect of their message. In fact, when the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band was first organized, the traveling team wrote into its founding document that wherever it went, it would preach the whole gospel: the Good News that Christ’s atonement did not only deal definitively with sin, but also with sickness.\(^78\)

Hughes held a nuanced view on divine healing. On the one hand, she acknowledged the role of Western biomedicine in healing. Her closest friend and co-founder of Bethel was Shi Meiyu [Mary Stone], a biomedical doctor. Jennie Hughes took pride in Bethel’s hospital and nursing school. On the other hand, she fully believed in divine healing. Reformation arguments that miracles had ceased after the apostolic era held no interest for her or other holiness people, who claimed that the Spirit that inaugurated the apostolic era was the selfsame Spirit who now animated their hearts.\(^79\)

What God did in the past, God could also do now.

For people in the holiness movement, God’s power was preeminently demonstrated in entire sanctification. The Pilgrim Holiness Church, whose General Superintendent ordained Jennie Hughes and Shi Meiyu [Mary Stone] in Shanghai in 1926, defined entire sanctification as a second work of grace that was instantaneous, and it was God’s way of “cleansing the heart of the recipient from all sin, setting him apart and enduing him with power for the successful accomplishment of all to which he is

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\(^{78}\) “Bentuan xuanyan,” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* 3, no. 4 (April 1931), 9.

called.” Such an internal notion of perfection inevitably sought external signs of the sanctifying grace. But what would Christian perfection look like in the world? “Stringent behavioral norms,” Jonathan Baer concluded, “provided the main way for the holy to enact and guard their purity.” Modest and simple clothes, strict observance of the Lord’s Day, avoidance of card playing, and complete abstinence from polluting substances like alcohol and tobacco headed the list. An important additional sign of total inward healing from sin was evinced in a healthy body. A pure heart and a pure body went together. That was where Hughes’s two seemingly contradictory perspectives on healing came together. Whether it was through divine agency or human agency, God wanted a holy person well. One holiness leader of the time expressed it thus: “God made no distinction

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80 Manual of the Pilgrim Holiness Church (Easton, MD: The Easton Publishing Company, 1926), 15. The “Bethel Newsletter, 1951” reported that Jennie Hughes and Mary Stone were ordained by Seth Rees in Shanghai in 1926. Rees was a newly elected General Superintendent of the Pilgrim Holiness Church. Rees had extensive connections to the holiness movement and was something of a representative of its multiple forms. He became popular at holiness camp meetings as Quaker revivalist. Later, Rees promoted the more radical holiness message of his friend and colleague Martin Wells Knapp as they co-founded the International Holiness Union and Prayer League. After he departed from Cincinnati where he worked with Knapp, Rees joined the Church of the Nazarene. Not long thereafter, though, the fledgling denomination expelled him. Rees started his own Pilgrim Temple, which he eventually led into the International Holiness Church (the child of his earlier work with Knapp). In the merger, the new denomination took the Pilgrim Holiness Church as its moniker. How extensively Rees influenced Hughes is difficult to determine, but his views on healing were probably more radical than her own. Sung, on the other hand, may have resonated with Rees’s suspicion of those who used human means to restore their health. For more information on Rees, see: Floyd Cunningham, ed. Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2009), 204-213; Baer, 183-188.


82 Ibid., 185.

83 See, for example: Bethel Heart Throbs of Revival 1931 (Shanghai: Bethel Mission, 1931), 72; Andrew Gih, Launch Out into the Deep!—Tales of Revival Through China’s Famous Bethel Evangelistic Bands and Further Messages (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Ltd., 1938), 36, 42 also describes how the Bethel Band worked for physical and spiritual healing while Sung was a member.
between healing with or without means.” The holiness movement stamped Sung’s ministry with its own distinctive imprint: a holy people meant a healthy people, and he was to be the agent through which God would produce both.

Chinese Christian Spirituality

The holiness ideas about healing were not radical departures from the piety Sung was nurtured in. Indeed, Jennie Hughes and others in the Wesleyan holiness movement would have seen their message as contiguous with Sung’s Methodist upbringing. If someone’s opinion differed with theirs on this matter, they would have argued they were reclaiming an earlier and purer Methodist piety. Divine healing, however, was not the sole possession of John Wesley’s heirs.

Miraculous cures were broadly embraced among China’s many moderate fundamentalists, as Kevin Xiyi Yao has called them. This group, composed mostly of missionaries and Chinese Christians from Reformed or non-Wesleyan denominations, was largely open to divine healing through the influence of the Higher Life, or Keswick, movement. Strict fundamentalists recoiled from divine healing because of its association with superstition, Pentecostalism, and liberalism. Moderate fundamentalists, by contrast,

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were broadly enthusiastic about the idea that the Holy Spirit could come in such power that a person could be physically restored and enabled to live victoriously over sin.\textsuperscript{87}

Modernists and ardent fundamentalists in China have garnered almost all of the scholarly attention, making their shared suspicions of divine healing appear normative. They only represented, however, a fraction of the Chinese Christian population. The overwhelming majority of Christians in China, as Melissa Inoye has demonstrated, believed that God could heal miraculously.\textsuperscript{88} Sung’s conviction that God could deliver a person from sickness was almost axiomatic in Chinese churches, and therefore he found an audience open to his ministrations when he began his work of healing.

Commercialism, Nationalism, Beauty, and Strength

The expectation that the body should be well was by no means limited to the church. Chinese culture, beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century, began to place a new emphasis on the healthy body—especially for the citizens of its modernizing cities. From one side, the emerging capitalist consumer culture of China’s urban centers saturated people’s lives with advertisements. The body became the primary focus of these advertisements after businesses discovered that landscape and floral

\textsuperscript{87} Baer, 76-78; 303. See, for example, the article “Books and the Book,” in \textit{The Bible for China} 56 (March 1932): 6-10. This is a review of a book \textit{Miraculous Healing}, which appeared in a periodical that Xiyi Yao identified with Chinese moderate fundamentalism. The review was favorable to the book, and especially drew out quotations from A. J. Gordon and A. B. Simpson, popular spokespersons for the Higher Life movement, as evidence of the book’s sanity on a thorny subject. The tone of the review suggested that the author assumed his or her reader already accepted the reality of miraculous healing. Interestingly, contributors who appear in the pages of \textit{The Bible for China} in the late 1920s and 1930s look like a who’s who of John Sung’s friends and contacts. He clearly found a home among its readership, a group for whom divine healing was already a faith commitment.

subjects, which were the common subjects of the earliest commercial images, simply could not compete with the allure of an idealized body.\textsuperscript{89}

In the 1920s and 30s, urbanites saw the human body presented to them in ever increasing physical detail. An advertisement for Colgate in 1921, for example, portrayed a woman in simple cartoonish-fashion. Her clothes identified her as a woman, but she displayed no other physical characteristics that could signify her age or sex. In 1931, a poster for Japanese \textit{Ken-i-koko-jo} tablets presented a young woman whose femininity was immediately identifiable. She had a beautiful, stylized face, which was adorned by earrings and stylishly waved hair. In addition, her hands were placed in a position to draw attention to the ever-so-slight curve of her right breast. Three years later, My Dear cigarettes placed an advertisement on the back cover of a magazine: an attractive young woman lay on rumpled sheets with a cigarette in her hand, staring out at the viewer. Little was left to the imagination as her nudity accentuated her voluptuous breasts.\textsuperscript{90} The ubiquity of images that linked together youth, beauty, and health forced attention on the human body in a new way.

Just as significantly, advertisements suggested that these newly depicted forms of youth, beauty, and health were achieved by manipulating the body.\textsuperscript{91} Whether one applied creams, lotions, and toothpastes to the body, adorned it with particular fabrics and prized

\textsuperscript{89} Ellen Johnston Laing, \textit{Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early-Twentieth-Century Shanghai} (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2004), 3.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., The images described appear on pages 145, 152, and 159.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 3, 19.
stones, or ingested medicines, the message was clear. The human body could be dramatically improved.

The commercial message that the urban Chinese populace should be bettering their bodies merged with another modern mandate, which came from a different direction. Chinese intellectuals had become obsessed with the body. They surmised that the nation’s weakness was connected to the weak bodies of its citizenry. The YMCA in China had capitalized on this and had made physical fitness an important part of their services, just as they had done in the United States. However, the underlying motivation for making use of such activities was quite different in the two countries. In the West, physical fitness emerged on the crest of “muscular Christianity.” It rose in prominence as Protestant antipathy toward sports declined, and a push to build character through activities like volleyball and basketball gained in popularity.92 In China, however, the steroids of nationalism fueled the race for physical fitness. If people would strengthen their bodies they would strengthen the emaciated nation.93

This notion not only drove China’s rising interest in sports, but—as suggested earlier—it also undergirded the state’s support of Western biomedicine. The nation’s intellectuals, who were largely trained in the West or modernized Japan. were convinced


that Western biomedicine promised progress.\textsuperscript{94} Already such things as the bacteria that caused tuberculosis had been identified in biomedical laboratories in 1882. Further revelations promised to come. With biomedicine able to unveil the causes of dreaded diseases, Chinese people could look forward to days of unprecedented health. At least that is what the state and the cultural elite communicated to the masses. The propaganda that surrounded Western biomedicine in the 1920s and 1930s made it appear that it could deliver instant, and thereby virtually miraculous, cures for sick bodies and for the weak county.\textsuperscript{95}

The triumvirate of commercial, political, and intellectual powers in China insisted people could and should feel better. The problem was, many people did not. It may have been true that scientists had identified the bacteria that caused tuberculosis, but they did not find any effective chemotherapy until 1943. In the intervening six decades, people in China suffered as they always had.\textsuperscript{96} Biomedicine seemed capable of explaining all manner of illness according to scientific canons, but frequently fell short of curing them. Diabetes and other chronic illnesses, for example, could be mitigated or managed, but


\textsuperscript{95} Andrews, “Tuberculosis and the Assimilation of Germ Theory in China, 1895-1937,” 146. See also, Baer, 17, for a further discussion on how biomedicine raised expectations for health in societies in both the East and the West, often beyond its capacity, and therefore sowed its own seeds of discontent among the general population.

biomedicine certainly never eliminated them.\textsuperscript{97} There was plenty of hype in urban China. People were promised, and they desired, a strong, beautiful, and healthy body. They pursued, however, an elusive dream.

The situation was ripe for Sung’s healing ministry in Jesus’ name to come to the fore. He was familiar, and had even experimented, with the wide diversity of treatment options in China, but he was convinced that he had found something better than anything else available. His revival meetings capitalized on popular Christian beliefs about the reality of divine healing, and through them Sung supplied urban China’s demand for instantaneous bodily improvement. Buttressed by the teachings of the holiness movement, Sung was confident that when he helped people deal with sin, he also assisted them in conquering sickness.

\textbf{Sung’s Work of Healing}

\textit{The Beginning}

Surprisingly, for something as attention grabbing as miraculous healing, it is difficult to date the beginning of Sung’s divine healing ministry. Whereas other famous Christian ministers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries frequently commenced their work of healing after experiencing divine healing in their own lives, no such origin story exists for Sung.\textsuperscript{98} One could speculate that Sung interpreted his experience in New York as divine healing, and therefore his license to heal in Jesus’

\textsuperscript{97} Cunningham, Andrew and Bridie Andrews, eds., \textit{Western Medicine as Contested Knowledge} (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 12.

\textsuperscript{98} Baer, 12-13.
name. Alternatively, his recovery from a heart condition through the prayers of two pastors in April 1931 could have launched his own healing career.\(^9\) However, neither story rose to prominence. After he returned to China, Sung never admitted to being sick in New York, and the latter story, about the weak heart, Sung turned into a lesson about obedience, not healing.

Clues about the starting date of Sung’s work of healing are contradictory. In 1935, F. E. Reynolds filed a report about Sung’s recent revival in his London Missionary Society station in Zhangzhou, Fujian. He began by explaining that Sung had come to Zhangzhou six years earlier, in March 1929. Since that time a number of things had changed in Sung’s services, Reynolds noted, including that “Physical healing was also a feature of his meetings this year.”\(^1\) One would assume, therefore, that Sung’s ministry of healing began sometime after 1929. However, the Minutes of the Hinghwa Annual Conference of 1929, which reported on the church’s activity in 1928, spoke glowingly about Sung’s ministry as the Conference Evangelist. One paragraph in the report, which did not name Sung explicitly, claimed that during the last year opium smokers had been set free, those possessed by demons were released from bondage, and the sick had been healed.\(^0\) Based on that description, and the fact that Sung was the primary figure in the

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\(^9\) Song Shangjie, April 14, 1931, SSD, TTC.

\(^1\) F. E. Reynolds, LMS Report, 1935, Council for World Mission Archives, Fukien, Reports, Box no. 1-6 (H-2137), Zug. 1978, Box no. 5, 1927-29, No. 362, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong.

filed report, biographer Ka-tong Lim concluded that Sung was already involved in divine healing by 1928.102

In public, Sung dated the inauguration of his healing work to an event that happened on December 10, 1931. On that night in Pingdu, Shandong, he was confronted with eighty people who sought healing. Sung emphasized that when a missionary doctor asked him to pray for them, he flat out refused: “I can’t heal them, only Jesus can heal them.”103 The doctor, however, was not dissuaded; he reminded Sung to hold fast to God’s promises from the Bible. Reluctantly, Sung agreed to pray, and was startled when Luo Huichen, a woman who had been unable to walk for eighteen years, stood up and moved energetically around the room.104 Her recovery made a lasting impression on Sung; he spoke of that miracle of healing far more than any other. The instantaneous remission of Luo’s condition also left a deep impression on the Southern Baptist missionaries who worked in the area. Mary Crawford wrote about it in her book The Shantung Revival published just two years after the event, as did C. L. Culpepper in his memoir written several decades later.105 For the purposes of determining when Sung’s healing ministry began, however, the most interesting thing about the oft-repeated story is


103 Song Shangjie, Peilingji [Devotional Messages] (Hong Kong: Bellman House, n.d.), 3.

104 Sung spoke about this healing in a number of ways. See, for example: Song Shangjie, December 10, 1931, SSD, TTC; Song Shangjie, “Yongyuan shifang [Eternally Set Free,” Budao zazhi [Evangelism] 7, no. 3 (May-June 1934): 14; Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 153; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 1, 124; Song Shangjie, Peilingji, 2.

not the multiple and contradictory ways it was told. The most significant fact is that, despite his claims to the contrary, the prayer in Pingdu was not Sung’s first foray into faith healing. Sung had already been writing in his journal about praying for the sick for several months before that famous night.

Without access to Sung’s entire journal, precisely when Sung started to pray for the sick has eluded me. In April 1931, though, Sung recorded an important promise in his diary: “In a short time God will give me the authority to heal sins, and also the source to heal sickness.” He explained, “God is concerned about me becoming proud so he has not given them to me yet.” That entry, made in the brief interlude between the times when he was a visiting preacher at the Bethel Mission and when he joined the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band, indicates that Sung was intrigued with divine healing, but he had yet to begin practicing it himself.

The divine promise he received was fulfilled soon thereafter. Once Sung joined the Bethel Band, he started to write in his journal of the miraculous healings God was performing through his services. The exact date he began is unclear, but the initiating event is indubitable. Just as the Bethel Mission had taught Sung the art of revivalism, so also divine healing was another gift he received there.

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106 Song Shangjie, April 10, 1931, SSD, TTC.

107 During his revival services in the Northeastern provinces, Sung recorded in his journal prayers for healing, and God’s gracious interventions on behalf of the sick. See, for example, Song Shangjie, October 27, 1931, SSD, TTC.
The Prominence of Healing

Once Sung began healing in Jesus’ name, he easily enfolded the deliverance of the sick into his mandate to share the Good News. He simply textured his ministry. The Lord “called me to preach, heal, and drive out spirits everywhere,” he told his audiences.  

They were all of one cloth. Sung never approached healing, or went about praying for the possessed, as if they were separate components from his preaching ministry. As he explained, “if what you preach is true, it will be evidenced with miracles.” Divine healings were not a distraction from or a corruption of his preaching ministry; they were its confirmation.

Not everyone agreed. Stanley Carson, a Methodist missionary in Hinghwa lamented that when Sung returned to Hinghwa to hold a revival after traveling around China and Southeast Asia for seven years, it was obvious that his healing ministry had come to overshadow more “spiritual matters.” F. E. Reynolds felt that after Sung introduced healing into his services he no longer tried to “keep himself in the background.” The focus of the services had shifted. Harry Boot, from the Reformed Church of America, also worried that people were attending the revivals for no other

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reason than to be healed. Sung acknowledged that danger too, and tried to rebuff those who came for, literally, carnal reasons.

The concerns of others moved in a different direction. Jeanette Veldman, a missionary in Xiamen, Fujian, regretted the damage Sung’s healing services did to those who were not cured. She recalled the pain of a mother who left his healing service crying. Her baby was not made well, and she could do nothing more than lash herself with the question, “Am I lacking faith?” Elizabeth Brewster, the missionary who had responsibility for Sung and his evangelistic work in Hinghwa when he first returned from the United States, criticized Sung for that same reason. “Some have lost their faith in their disappointment,” she grieved. “I wish he had not added healing to his wonderful preaching ministry.” In her mind, it was not an essential component of his call to preach the gospel, but an undesirable and harmful “tangent.”

The criticisms were potent enough that Sung’s hagiographers have minimized the importance of his healing ministry. William Schubert, for example, emphasized that Sung only held services for healing as a concession to the constant demand, and he strictly limited them. “Once a week,” he recalled, “he would give an afternoon meeting for

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113 Song Shangjie, Peilingji, 1.


115 Eva M. Brewster, Her Name was Elizabeth, unpublished manuscript, China Records Project RG8, Box 28, File 13, Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, Connecticut (henceforth, YDSL).

116 Ibid.
healing.”¹¹⁷ Leslie Lyall pushed the frequency back further: “Dr. Sung usually had one meeting in every campaign,” which could last as long as a month, “at which he would give an address on healing and the necessity for a sincere repentance before inviting the sick to come forward.”¹¹⁸ A missionary for the Gereformeerde Kerk in the Dutch East Indies, Cornelia Baarbé, insisted that healing took a distant second to his preaching:

> From the beginning, Dr. Sung had emphasized that the center of attention was the message of the gospel. No one could request prayer, without having attended three full days of his preaching in the church. Sung was very precise and methodical about this.¹¹⁹

She even remembered a case in which Sung required a pastor from a distant congregation to sign a statement that he knew the supplicant, and that the person had been in attendance at the revival meetings before he agreed to pray for the patient.¹²⁰ Pointing out that Sung regulated his work of healing by setting one specific time for special healing services, each hagiographer emphasized that healing never eclipsed his evangelistic work.

> What these apologies lacked, however, was an appraisal of what transpired outside of those specially designated times. Sung may have announced a special service dedicated to healing, but he never deterred people from pursuing God’s touch either before or after that part of the revival. Sung ended every single service in Indonesia with an invitation for people to come to God with their “sins that oppressed, evil, and

¹¹⁷ William E. Schubert, China Records Project RG8, Box 185a, Tape 6.1, YDSL.

¹¹⁸ Lyall, 170.

¹¹⁹ Baarbé, 36.

¹²⁰ Ibid.
burdens.” Sung’s hagiographers were either ignorant of or purposefully silent on the fact that most people understood his offer to include physical healing. Sung’s journals reveal that sick people came to him constantly, meeting him on the platform at the end of his message, or arranging to visit him between services. Daily he responded to requests to pray for whatever might ail a person.

Healing was central to Sung’s revival ministry, and an integral part of his presentation of the gospel. Perhaps those who have felt obligated to say otherwise wanted to emphasize that his healing ministry was always subjugated to his evangelistic work. If so, they probably did not understand Sung’s theology. If they had, there would have been no need to construct their own defense. Sung always saw salvation as preeminent; healing was the byproduct of a restored relationship with God.

The Theology of Healing

Throughout his career Sung never waivered from his early conviction that “Healing sin is more important than healing sickness.” Even after he joined Bethel and his healing ministry flourished, he still insisted that “healing the outside is not as important as healing the inside.” In fact, one of his continuous charges against the missionaries and the Chinese Christian leadership that surrounded him was their obsession with a “heal-the-outside” gospel. “The modern, so-called famous leaders of the

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121 Baarbé, 26.

122 Song Shangjie, March 5, 1931, SSD, TTC.

church,” he bitterly observed, “were consumed with building hospitals, education programs, and negotiating church unions.”124 They failed, however, in their only divinely ordained task: to save souls.

The focus on healing the outside could only cause confusion, Sung concluded. In a sermon illustration, he was bemused and then dismayed by the answer a young woman gave to the most important question she would ever be asked: Have you been born again? She replied, “I had a stomach ache once. I prayed and got well again.” A ludicrous response, he told those assembled. It confused physical healing with spiritual healing. That girl had been tricked into thinking that a mended body meant she had a mended soul.125

Sung protested vehemently, probably because the girl’s logic was a distorted version of his own. Whereas she imagined that a healthy body was a sign of a healthy spirit, Sung taught that a sick body was a sign of a sick spirit. Health, by itself, had no clear meaning. Sickness, on the other hand, was always symptomatic of something sinister. “You must absolutely avoid taking sickness lightly,” he cautioned his followers.126 He usually said it bluntly: “You should know, no matter what kind of sickness you have, it comes from sin! If you have sin, you have sickness. No sin, no

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124 Ibid.

125 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 52.

126 Song Shangjie, *Fenxingji*, 73.
sickness!” In all of history, Sung only knew of two people who were exceptions to that rule: Job and the man who was born blind in order to show forth God’s glory when Jesus healed him (John 9). In all other cases, sickness was the result of unresolved sin. It became his primary objective, therefore, to help people deal with the sin in their lives—whether at one of his regular revival services, in private interviews, or during a special healing service—and to deal with it decisively. To do anything less, to try and relieve physical pain while not eliminating the source, would be an empty gesture.

Part of the Good News Sung proclaimed was that God promised so much more than temporary physical relief. The death and resurrection of Jesus was the double cure for the soul and the body. “Jesus does not only conquer when sin has made our spirit ill,” Sung rejoiced with his audience, “He also conquered over the weakness and misery of the body.” Christ’s death dealt with sin—the root of the problem—and therefore with sickness. The atonement, to express it in terms that would have been familiar to his audience, worked like Chinese medicine. Biomedicine, many people in China assumed, could make someone feel better temporarily, but it only relieved symptoms. National medicine, by contrast, addressed “an underlying disorder that must be treated for the local

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127 Song Shangjie, “Xiang wo chui lingqi [May the Spirit Breathe on Me],” Budao zazhi [Evangelism] 8, no. 3 (May-June 1935): 1; see also: Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 72.

128 See, for example: Journal, April 14, 1934; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 1, 89, 129; Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol. 2, 7-8; Song Shangjie, Wode jianzheng, 108-109.

129 Baarbé, 37 (italics original).
symptoms to disappear.”\textsuperscript{130} It provided a “‘radical’ or complete cure.”\textsuperscript{131} The work of God was like National medicine; it targeted the underlying disorder. God obliterated sin, the source of the illness, and thereby granted the afflicted more than the mere veneer of well-being.\textsuperscript{132} God made people whole.

The kind of total health Sung promoted came in a two-step process. He claimed that if a person “has faith and is willing to confess his sins, to ask for forgiveness, then that person’s sickness will be made better.”\textsuperscript{133} There was no reversing the order. In other parts of the world, and even in China, many people used healing as a way to prompt a conversion.\textsuperscript{134} For them, healing was evangelistic, if you will. After someone was healed, he or she was likely to convert to Christianity. Sung rejected that idea. Health sprang out of holiness, not the other way around.

“You want me to pray for you,” he explained to an audience eager to have his hands placed on their sick bodies, “but you must understand the gospel and repent from your heart. Only then am I able to pray for you.”\textsuperscript{135} With illustrations from his own

\textsuperscript{130} Kleinman, 279.

\textsuperscript{131} Kleinman, 286.

\textsuperscript{132} Baer, 82-83, saw links between this line of thinking and premillennialism in his study of divine healing in the United States. Human efforts to achieve peace and perfection could do nothing more than provide short-term benefits. Only God’s direct intervention could establish the Kingdom of God. Sung, like his premillennialist counterparts in the United States, extended this logic to what human healing could do, as opposed to what God’s healing could do.

\textsuperscript{133} Song Shangjie, \textit{Fenxingji}, 72.


\textsuperscript{135} Song Shangjie, \textit{Fenxingji}, 72.
career, Sung offered concrete examples of what needed to happen in order for a person to be healed. He shared stories, for instance, of prayers that went unanswered until a person truly confessed and was made right with God.\textsuperscript{136} He also warned his audience against trying to get healing without getting God. He recalled a woman who wanted to be rid of an evil spirit that afflicted her. Sung was able to drive the spirit away, but since the lady had not truly and thoroughly confessed her sins, the demon soon returned and she was worse off than before.\textsuperscript{137} His audience should not make the same mistake. Christ’s atonement secured salvation and health, but they always came in that order.

The Practice of Healing

The conviction that anyone who wanted to be healed had to repent, first, and receive God’s pardon, made Sung emphasize confession. In his healing services, verbally expunging sins was the pivotal moment on which all else hinged. He dutifully preached on sin and sickness in his penultimate or last service in a city, and he would read and explain Mark 16:17-18, and/or James 5:14-15.\textsuperscript{138} The verses from Mark reminded the audience that God promised to heal the sick as a sign to those who believed the gospel. The passage from James outlined the biblical conditions for healing: the presence of the elders of the church—which Sung identified as himself; prayer; anointing the sick person

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 72.

\textsuperscript{137} Song Shangjie, \textit{Forty John Sung Revival Sermons}, vol. 2, 78.

with oil; and confession. Prayers for healing would come to nothing, Sung emphasized, if people did not first name their errant behaviors to Jesus, and thereby have Christ remove the sins that were obstructing God’s healing power.

Before he would pray for anyone Sung slowed the service down. An appropriate chorus, such as “shizijia, shizijia [The Cross, The Cross],” would be sung collectively—sometimes for thirty minutes. By repeating song’s simple message about how a person could be completely cleansed from sin, the mind of the audience became fixed on the awful medium by which God defeated the power of sin and sickness.

Then, at the climax of the service, those assembled were told to pray simultaneously, fervently and out loud, naming their sins. The eradication of sin had to precede the eradication of sickness. In the minutes that followed, a rumble of voices would fill the sanctuary, as supplicants plead, cried, and sometimes shouted for mercy. The vehemence of the prayers could be unsettling, but as the roar of confession descended from its crescendo, a deep stillness settled on the assembly.

In the quietness, Sung knelt on the platform facing the audience. An assistant would read out the name of a sick person from a stack of cards that had been turned in earlier in the service. Sung required those who wanted to come for healing to write down

139 Baarbé, 36.
142 F. E. Reynolds, LMS Report, 1935. Reynolds found the individual prayers uttered collectively to be extremely unnerving. He felt “the practice of all kneeling at the same time and praying loudly in their own words in a frenzied manner [was] calculated to completely unbalance the mentally weak.”
their name, address, and their particular affliction. When a person’s name was called, he or she would go—or be carried—up to the platform and kneel before Sung. He would then pour oil into his hand, and usually rub it over the sick person’s forehead, though some observers noted he occasionally smacked the side of the person’s head with his oiled hand. Sung then prayed, frequently quoting a verse from the Bible, and commanding the illness to leave “In Jesus’ name!”143 When he finished, the person before him moved off the platform, and the next name was announced.

These services took hours, as three to four hundred people commonly waited for God to restore them to health and strength. Those hundreds of people, though, represented but a portion of seekers who visited Sung for healing. Many, perhaps even the majority, sought God’s miraculous intervention during personal interviews with Sung. Although it was extraordinarily taxing to lead a service for two hours in the morning, speak personally with scores of people, and then repeat the process again in the afternoon and evening, Sung encouraged it. Whenever he concluded a revival service, he dismissed the people with the rather curt announcement: “The meeting is over.” He added, though, “those who are troubled in heart stay and I will pray for them.”145

The people who stayed for personal interviews frequently sought healing. The emphasis on confession was no less obvious in private than it was in the public assembly.

143 Schubert, 62.

144 Lyall, 171.

In Beijing, for instance, Sung led those who wanted an audience with him to the neighboring home of James Leynse, a Presbyterian missionary. In a letter to his friends, Leynse described what ensued:

Between meetings our living room, dining room, hall, study—even upstairs bedrooms were converted into sanctuaries where burdened souls knelt to find salvation. Humphrey and Wally, back from the school, wandered sometimes in awe among those who wept and pled while waiting for a personal interview.\footnote{James P. Leynse to Friends, Christmas 1932, China Records RG 8, BOX 115, FOLDER 6, YDSL.} When the wait was over, and a person was called to speak to Sung for about fifteen minutes, Sung always ensured that he helped his visitor “thoroughly repent.”\footnote{Donald MacInnis, “Will Schubert,” Donald MacInnis Papers, RG 204, Box 8, Folder 89, YDSL; Sung’s journal entries frequently used the language that Sung helped people to “thoroughly repent.” While he was in Tianjin, for instance, it was a common refrain virtually every day. Song Shangjie, SSD, TTC, April 11 – April 27, 1934.} For men, these confessions were usually a straightforward catalogue of sins. Li Qisheng, for instance, told Sung that he smoked, gambled, went to shows, and visited prostitutes. Once he had named all his misdeeds, Sung prayed for his physical healing.\footnote{Song Shangjie, April 27, 1934, SSD, TTC.} Most of his female visitors, though, took a broader approach. They not only confessed their sins to Sung, but also told him whatever else might be troubling them. Wang Wangming, for example, admitted that she had stolen. But she also added that she had borrowed money, and that her husband was dead. Sung dealt with her bad foot the same as he did all the others: he laid his hands on her and prayed.\footnote{Song Shangjie, April 17, 1934, SSD, TTC.}
Enabling the Disabled

The way Sung let his male and female “patients” name their problems—whether in the assembly hall or in a private interview—inverted the common medical encounter. Doctors who practiced National medicine were supposed to be able to tell a patient what was wrong by taking his or her pulse, and maybe looking at the tongue. The true expert in traditional Chinese medicine was supposed to listen to the body, not to the patient. The more questions a doctor asked, the less qualified he appeared. He was expected to tell the patient what was wrong, not the other way around. Similarly, physicians trained in Western biomedicine were the experts on disease. They might ask a few questions to understand the symptoms, but they determined what was wrong. Andrew Cunningham and Bridie Andrews have observed that in Western biomedicine:

> the patient is not a participant in the diagnostic or curative processes, except in a trivial sense. The patient does not share the knowledge world of the doctor, for the patient has no scientific expertise. The patient has to take on the submissive “patient’s role” in order to receive treatment. There is no room for social negotiation of roles: doctor and patient do not come to a consensual conclusion about the nature of the illness or its treatment.  

In such encounters, only the doctor trained in biomedicine has the privilege to make pronouncements on disease. Seeking the help of a god was little different. Divine diagnoses were made through shamans, and because they were divine in origin they were difficult to challenge. Medical encounters ensured that someone other than the patient

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150 Kleinman, 279.

always defined the illness.

Sung, by contrast, allowed each person to name his or her own affliction. Whether writing the name of their sickness on a card, or sharing it in an interview with Sung, his “patients” determined what they suffered from. This not only empowered them in the healing process, but it also granted them freedom to conceive of their sickness however they pleased.

The multiple cases of tuberculosis that Sung faced are instructive on this point. Tuberculosis was a slippery concept in Chinese. The first Western doctor to translate biomedical ideas into the Chinese language worked before the bacteria that caused tuberculosis were identified. In translation, therefore, he sought Chinese terms that described the symptoms and course of the disease, rather than the pathogen that caused it. When he translated “consumption,” he selected the word lao from the Chinese medical vocabulary, because it meant exhaustion or, when combined with the radical for disease, a “wasting disease.” The symptoms for lao—coughs, shortness of breath, phlegm, fever, vomiting of blood, etc.—were similar to the indicators Western doctors used to diagnose consumption. It appeared like the right word to use in translating pulmonary consumption. Feilaozheng, or lung exhaustion disease, therefore, became the term to describe consumption in hospitals across China.

The problem that surfaced, especially after the bacteria that caused tuberculosis

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152 The following material on tuberculosis is derived from Andrews, “Tuberculosis and Assimilation of Germ Theory.”
were discovered, was that in Chinese medicine \textit{lao} was not caused by a bacteria. \textit{Lao}, it was popularly believed, was the result of malevolent spirits that fed on a person’s heart and lungs. Japanese doctors, who were trained in Western biomedicine but who used Chinese characters, decided that the ideas associated with \textit{lao} perpetuated superstition. They invented, therefore, a term for “tubercle”—the pathogen that biomedical laboratories had identified as the source of the sickness. With their freshly coined neologism, Japanese doctors put a new word into currency that could replace ideas about evil spirits, and the now dated ideas about consumption. \textit{Feijiehe}, or lung tubercle, described the dreaded disease in sterile biomedical terms.

The new language from Japan, however, did not displace \textit{lao}, either with its traditional association with evil spirits or with its association with Western medicine’s concept of consumption. The upshot was that tuberculosis was problematic. If a doctor diagnosed the disease using the Japanese terminology, it was strictly scientific, but the words made no sense to Chinese patients. Alternatively, to use the ancient Chinese term could introduce unwanted associations with spirits or outdated ideas about consumption.

Medical doctors may have struggled with this linguistic conundrum, but Sung’s approach completely sidestepped it. He allowed those who came to him to tell him what they had, and his journals show that they spoke of their lung diseases in a whole variety of terms. In one afternoon, those who came for healing told Sung they had \textit{feibing} [lung sickness], \textit{laobing} [wasting sickness], \textit{laozheng} [consumption], \textit{lao} [exhaustion], and \textit{tuxie} [spitting blood]. All probably referred to tuberculosis, but Sung recorded their self-
diagnoses exactly as given to him. He did not try to convince them that, in fact, they suffered from *feijiehe*. He simply jotted down their own terms for their own illnesses. Whether his patients were thinking of consumption, an evil spirit, or bacteria made no difference to the revivalist. God, after all, could defeat every enemy.

Sung demonstrated similar latitude when he dealt with evil spirits. He spoke of them frequently, and prayed for people to be delivered of them regularly, but what precisely he meant by a demon, devil, or evil spirit was ambiguous. On the one hand, Sung sometimes displayed a secularizing tendency on the subject. He suggested that demon possession in the Bible might be parallel to mental illness.\(^{153}\) He had a penchant for speaking of evil spirits in figurative terms. He peppered his sermons with calls for people to be delivered from “the opium devil, the gambling devil, the adultery devil, the lying devil, etc.”\(^{154}\) Or, he could write in his journal, “This morning I cried and confessed my sins, and in that way drove off the evil spirit [of discouragement].”\(^{155}\) When Sung named the spirits, he often allegorized them according to behaviors or attitudes that worked against the purposes of God.

On the other hand, Sung also spoke of spirits as external agents who inflicted harm on people. One boy, Sung remembered, ran afoul of supernatural powers when he hacked off the hand of a temple god in his modernizing zeal. The young man was, in turn,


\(^{154}\) Song Shangjie, *Peilingji*, 85.

\(^{155}\) Song Shangjie, April 17, 1934, SSD, TTC.
afflicted with a crippled hand. Sung also took seriously the work of other ritual specialists. He believed they harnessed supernatural power when they interacted with other gods, spirits, or employed magical formulas. Their problem was that to invoke the spirits was ultimately to become the subject of them. A woman Sung knew in Fujian, for instance, used to make her living casting out demons until she herself was possessed by them.

Regardless of whether he or his audience thought in secular or spiritual terms about spirits, demons, and devils, Sung delivered a consistent message once he joined up with Bethel: God’s power was at work in him to cast out all evil. Deliverance from the spirit of smoking and from the spirit of a deity occurred through the same process, or ritual, and it was used in all of Sung’s healing encounters. At any time during his revival campaign, a person could take the initiative and come to Sung for help; the supplicant named the problem; Sung helped the person confess his or her sins; Sung touched the sick or possessed person and prayed. In fact, Sung used the same technique in every circumstance, no matter if a person came to him to be saved, filled with the Holy Spirit, healed, or delivered from a devil. “The Great Physician,” as Sung called Jesus, made


158 Song Shangjie, April 14, 1934, SSD, TTC.

159 See, for example, Song Shangjie, April 14, 1934, SSD, TTC; and Song Shangjie, April 18, 1934, SSD, TTC, when Sung uses the same formula to describe how he deals with those who come to him for salvation and for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
people well. The source of the affliction did not matter. A person could define their trouble in whatever way made sense to him or her. The problem could be germs, spirits, bad attitudes, immoral behaviors, or demons. Whatever it was, Sung’s practice of healing invited people to be made whole in spirit, and thereby be restored in body.

The Narratives of Healing

Sung always relied on testimonies in his healing ministry. In a way, in fact, miraculous healings only occurred through testimonies. Until it was named as divine intervention, a recovery could be explained in a variety of alternative ways. It could be called spontaneous remission, potent magic, the natural course of a disease, or the like. The indeterminacy of divine healing required someone to testify that it was God who made him, her, or another well.

Sung always carefully set apart time in his services for people to ascend the platform and give a brief word about their spiritual and physical transformation. If someone took that opportunity, of course, he or she implicitly agreed with Sung’s description of a miraculous change. Those who were not saved or not healed according to Sung’s dictates had nothing to say; they did not bother to come forward. That meant the testimonies were uniformly positive, though they tended to move in one of three directions.

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The first narrative of divine healing was the most memorable and dramatic. Sung always required a person’s testimony to be brief, and only a few words were necessary for this type of witness: “As [Dr. Sung] put his hands on me, I saw a red light follow his hands and come down. Six years of asthma was cured all at once.”

Others even testified without words, since in the context of a divine healing service it was unnecessary to explain that God had done the miracle. One man, for example, simply pulled off his shirt in jubilation, and allowed everyone to marvel that the giant carbuncle, which had protruded out from his belly, was gone. Each person joyfully expressed what God had done in brief, idiosyncratic and highly personal ways. Enthusiasm, even elation, can be heard in their words and pictured in their faces. Sickness had taken on a new meaning. It was no longer about loss, but about gain: God had been found at the point of their weakness.

The second type of testimony witnessed to a different kind of healing. The illness was not gone, they admitted, but their suffering was now seen in a different light. A man with bad eyes, for instance, did not recover his sight, but he did rejoice in his realization that he needed only his mouth to preach the gospel. A terminal patient gave thanks for her ailment, because she had been able to use all the attention that was lavished on her as

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163 Song Shangjie, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, vol. 1, 152.
she approached death to lead her entire family to faith in Jesus Christ. Or, in another case, even after a young woman died, Sung could praise God, because the deceased youth had appeared to her mother and classmate on a divine errand to spread the gospel. Not everyone was healed, these testimonies acknowledged, but Sung’s services still offered his audience good news: “suffering is not meaningless but part of a cosmic vision of redemption.”

The third way to respond was to muddle through an inconclusive cure. Hints of the ubiquity of this third type of response surfaced in the scores of generic reports that appeared in various Christian publications. One from 1937, for instance, declared: “Mr. Sung rubbed oil on and prayed for 479 sick people. We truly saw God’s great glory: 200-300 people received the Lord’s amazing healing.” Two conclusions can be drawn from that kind of printed statement. First, not everyone was healed. A significant gap existed between those who sought healing, and those who claimed to receive it. Second, healing was a very imprecise term.

The specific number of “479 sick people” stood in stark contrast to the vague “200-300 people” who actually received healing. Why was that? Most likely, because it was difficult to determine if someone truly was made well. If someone suffered from

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165 Song Shangjie, Forty John Sung Revival Sermons, vol 1., 59-60.


periodic headaches, did the fact that she did not have one the day after the healing, the
day of the testimony service, signify that she was miraculously cured? It would be
difficult to say. For one or two there was little doubt of divine intervention, so they
became the focus of the reports. The man with the carbuncle that disappeared, for
example, or the person whose obviously crooked spine was straightened headlined the
testimonies. Less often one might find a reference to someone who found meaning in his
or her continued state of ill health. For the rest of the people who had hoped for a divine
touch, however, it became necessary either to live with uncertainty about their recovery
or to resign themselves to the fact that they were numbered among those whose condition
remain unchanged.

Evidence suggests that the people who experienced uncertain healings, those in
the loose “200-300” category, often tried to mask the vagueness of their status. They may
have made their way onto the platform to give thanks to God, but unlike those who could
describe what happened using their own words, this group of people tended to borrow
language from the Bible. In one case, a blind boy clutched to Sung’s suggestion that
sometimes in order for a miracle to be made manifest, a person must first testify in faith
to God’s healing touch.168 “I can see!” he therefore dutifully insisted after the healing
service, “I can see [John 9:25]!” Evidence to the contrary did not dampen the vehemence
with which he staked his claim, nor the jubilation among the crowd. When the young

168 Song Shangjie, Fenxingji, 73; Song Shangjie, “Zhiyao yangwang Yesu,” Budao zazhi 7, no. 1
man failed to identify how many fingers were held before his face or what objects were in someone’s hands, those closest to him dismissed it. “People said that it was not remarkable that, never having seen, he could not identify objects.” Only after Sung had left the city did the boy finally admit that he was trying to believe himself into seeing. For those like him, who longed for a complete recovery, it was tempting to invoke biblical phrases as a way to bolster their faith against lingering doubts. In another case, the biblical words were not borrowed but loaned. After Sung’s revival, a missionary enthusiastically wrote home: “Blind Receives Sight, the Dumb Speaks [Matthew 15:31].” Two girls, he enthusiastically reported, proved that Jesus still healed just “the same as in the Holy Land during Bible times.” It took a more sober colleague to point out that the blind girl “did not have the best control of her eyes,” or that the dumb girl “did not have perfect control over her voice.”

Few people, it appears, were able to sustain living with an uncertain healing, no matter how well they could tell their stories as an extension of the biblical narrative. Eventually, the persistence of blindness, the visibility of an unwanted growth, or unremitting pain sent those who experienced no healing, or an incomplete cure, to seek other medical attention. Such a decision fell short of Sung’s ideals. But, when God did

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not appear to be all that was required, most people sought help elsewhere.

**The Question of Indigenization**

Much of the scholarship on Chinese Christianity over the last two decades has emphasized the continuity of “independent” or “popular” forms of the Christian faith with Chinese religious traditions. In his splendid study of Christian movements in the twentieth century, for example, Lian Xi argued that the ministry of Sung, and others, “converged” with popular Chinese religious sensibilities. Sung created, to borrow an idea from Daniel Bays, a kind of sectarian-Christian fusion—a blend of heterodox Chinese religious practices with a Pentecostal style of Christianity. From that perspective, Sung’s “magic of healing” looked like traditional forms of religious healing in China.

That conclusion should not appear outlandish, for Christians have often borrowed “techniques and ideas from other religions and from numerous forms of medicine,” as they propagated their faith. Indeed, one would expect healing to be a kind of ground zero for indigenization. With a person’s life at stake, the Christian healer is hard pressed to adopt the vocabulary and practices their patients expected. If someone asks for bread,

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174 Lian, 10.

175 Porterfield, 8.
those offering divine healing can hardly hand him or her a stone (Luke 11:11). Or can they?

This section argues that Christian indigenization is not always a straightforward move toward the adoption or adaptation of local ways. That is to presume a kind of static culture, a monolithic practice of medicine, and a dominant religious system. If such conditions existed, Sung would have had a clear norm to which he would have to adjust. But Chinese culture, medicine, and religion were nothing like that during the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937). How then, would one even measure indigenization? To what would Sung have had to conform to appear truly Chinese? Did he need to wear a white coat and use biomedical terms like many of his Chinese urban medical colleagues? Would he have done better to adopt the newly minted language of National medicine? What would be more authentic: to sound like a fortuneteller or to speak like a shaman? Indigenization in such a complex environment borders on the absurd. In the midst of such multiplicity, Sung did not need to imitate any medical system, as every medical system—including his own Christian healing—operated on the same terms: could it satisfy? Indigenization, therefore, did not happen in the realm of Sung’s practice of healing. Indigenization occurred, instead, in his pursuit of healing. As Sung became increasingly sick in the late 1930s, he had to make a series of painful personal negotiations, the end of which required him to conform his ideas about healing to China’s social reality. Sung ultimately accepted that his message of divine healing was but part of China’s medical pluralism.
Indigenous Practices, Indigenous Ideas?

Indigenization is a slippery concept. Who is the agent? What exactly is he, she, or are they indigenizing? How does one know when indigenization is accomplished? When dealing with such an important, but elusive notion, one is tempted to think in lists. In one column, a person might imagine the ideas and practices that Sung employed in his healing ministry. In the other column, a person might note the precedents in Chinese culture or jot down the parallels with Chinese practices. It might be simplistic, but it is this process that suggests the “uncanny resemblance” between Sung’s style of Christianity and popular Chinese religion.176

Certainly a cursory glance at how Sung practiced healing reveals some fascinating parallels. He claimed not to be involved in the healing process. “I am nothing more than a piece of wood,” Sung wrote in his journal, “God’s power borrows me to make itself manifest.”177 When asked why he jumped around during his revival services, Sung explained, “When I preach it is not really I who preach, but God’s Spirit who manifests himself through my body.”178 His comments were almost identical to those made by shamans. They insisted that they were not the ones at work in healing encounters; the gods borrowed them. When a heavenly spirit would take control of their bodies, shamans would breathe heavily and jump around rhythmically.179 Possession by a divine being

176 Lian, 9.

177 Song Shangjie, December 10, 1931, SSD, TTC.

178 Song Shangji, Peilingji, 31.

179 Ahern, Chinese Ritual and Politics, 49.
was described and enacted by Sung and shamans in similar ways.

Overlap with popular religious ideas also appeared in how Sung used the Bible as an object imbued with special power. His recitation of Scripture during healing and exorcism demonstrated that he saw the Word of God as authoritative over sin, sickness, and evil spirits. He also described the Bible as possessing healing qualities. In a sermon on the woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years (Mark 5:25-34), he explained to everyone assembled:

If you want your issue of blood to be healed you must touch Jesus’ garment every day…. Jesus’ garment is the Bible. Just as power went out of Jesus when the woman touched him, so if we read the Bible every day, Jesus’ power is able to flow into our bodies.  

Such beliefs had precedents in Chinese culture. Daoist priests used spiritually charged objects to heal people, and sacred texts were so potent that just owning a copy could act as a talisman. People across China recognized that holy books were potent, and Sung’s use of the Bible coincided with that widely held conviction.

The explanation that sickness was rooted in sin coincided with Chinese folk and religious understandings of illness. For almost two millennia, Chinese people had held that “The presence of sickness was thought to indicate some moral failing.” To know that “misfortunes were prima facie evidence of their own misconduct, or of misconduct

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182 Stickmann, 2.
on the part of their forbearers or descendents,” gave meaning to people’s ailments.\textsuperscript{183}

Western biomedicine, by contrast, diminished the “blame culture of illness,” by externalizing the cause of sickness—saying it was caused by a pathogen.\textsuperscript{184} That modern explanation suggested that illness no longer came from sin, but from unwanted cells. Some people may have found that new medical message liberating, but others found it unhelpful. It reduced sickness to chance, and thereby undermined attempts to make meaning out of the suffering. Most Chinese people, it appears, preferred the traditional message captured in \textit{shanshu}, ubiquitous books on moral improvement that were passed out for free by those wanting to acquire merit. “Misfortune or good luck have no need for doors—man himself call them in. The rewards for good and bad are like the shadow which follows the object.”\textsuperscript{185} The belief in the causal connection between sin and sickness rarely created such thorough consistency as to send those with common temporary ailments on a quest to purify their souls.\textsuperscript{186} It did mean, however, that when a particularly painful or intractable illness brought a person low, he or she could explain it, and pursue a religious solution—just as Sung always said.


\textsuperscript{186} Topley, “Chinese Traditional Etiology and Methods of Cure in Hong Kong,” 255-257; Ahern, “Sacred and Secular Medicine in a Taiwan Village,” 26.
The list of similarities can go on. Religious healing in China, for instance, was almost always a public event. Sung’s healing services, and even the way penitents huddled together and pled for mercy with tears as they waited to speak with Sung personally, fit that pattern. Both Sung and other ritual experts dealt with sickness as a social reality, more than as a biological malfunction. They treated the person rather than the disease. One can also note that Sung’s practice of healing was non-invasive, maintaining the Chinese medical tradition that a body should not be violated by any kind of cutting or surgery. If a person wants to find commonalities between Sung and various Chinese healing practices that preceded him and his Christian message, the ancient adage applies: seek and you will find.

The problem is not in finding similarities, but in interpreting them. Does the fact that Sung thought or acted in ways that were part of a longer tradition of healing in China mean he crafted his ministry to conform to those canons? Not necessarily so. Better explanations lie closer at hand.

Sung’s ideas and practices of healing had biblical precedents. People possessed by the Holy Spirit were part of the Christian canon (cf. 1 Sam 19:20-24; cf. Mark 13:11). His connection between sin and sickness did not require Daoist or Buddhist precedents; the idea was already present in the stories of God chastising Israel for her sins, and using

187 Kleinman, 220.


189 Croizier, Traditional Medicine in Modern China, 26-27.
various plagues and illnesses to turn Israel to repentance.\textsuperscript{190} He did not need to borrow particular Chinese ideas, when the Bible already shared them.

Christian tradition can also account for many of the similarities. It is vital to remember that Sung did not learn his healing ministry by mimicking Chinese religious or medical specialists. He only started to heal three years into his ministerial career, after he joined the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band. The holiness movement’s beliefs about healing best account for his teaching on the source of illness and its cure. Sung did not need to cast his ideas or practices about healing in any particular Chinese mold, when Christian Biblicism and the holiness movement already shared them.

Much of the discussion about indigenization flounders on this very shoal. The points where Christianity is said to converge with indigenous religious ideas or practices are often at the extraordinary or exotic places, for instance where miracles are said to occur or supernatural beings are engaged.\textsuperscript{191} This, however, is an unhelpful observation insofar as religion—by many definitions—is concerned with those very elements.\textsuperscript{192} The fact that Sung and other Chinese religious and medical practitioners worked for miraculous cures, battled against evil spirits, or used objects charged with supernatural

\textsuperscript{190} Amanda Porterfield went so far as to claim that the “affirmation of a connection between sickness and sin lies at the root of Christian teaching.” See: Porterfield, 5.

\textsuperscript{191} Inouye, 14-15.

\textsuperscript{192} Although many scholars make finer points, the ubiquity of the general definition appears in such things as the \textit{Oxford Dictionary}. Religion is defined as “The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.”
power says little about indigenization. It primarily affirms that Christianity and Chinese religions both believe in and try to interact appropriately with the non-material world.

That said, the points of connection between Sung’s healing ministry and traditional Chinese religious healing ceremonies were nonetheless real. The likenesses that existed between Sung’s work and those of other Chinese healers may have helped some people to be ready to submit to his healing touch. On the other hand, the similarities may have had little to do with his drawing power. After all, for centuries Chinese people had used both divination and bonesetters to treat their ailments, not because their techniques were so similar, but because they believed each form of treatment to be efficacious. In China’s medically pluralistic environment continuity was not as important as effectiveness.

For that reason, it is unwise to overemphasize the links between Sung’s healing practices and those of others. Sung did not need to masquerade as a variant kind of traditional healer. The resemblances that existed between his work and that of others may have more to do with the universal performance of healing than with anything else.\textsuperscript{193} Certainly, the similarities did not equal identical patrimony; nor did they suggest that Sung or his listeners purposefully bent his ministry in order to fit with some preexisting form of Chinese healing. Indigenization, as a process of transformation, did not happen primarily—if at all—in the realm of theological ideas or ritual practices. Rather,

\textsuperscript{193} Carol Laderman and Marina Roseman, eds., \textit{The Performance of Healing} (New York: Routledge, 1996). Laderman and Roseman argued that all healing encounters share a similar structure, so they are easily recognizable and—for that reason—cross cultural and religious divides reasonably well.
indigenization in Sung’s healing ministry, the process of adaptation to or adoption of local lifeways, took place through dealing with his own health.

Sick Unto Death

If a person wants to see how Sung’s interaction with the various forms of healing available in China changed him, then one should not focus on how he practiced divine healing in his services, but how he personally pursued health when he became deathly ill. Before Sung joined the Bethel Mission and began healing in Jesus’ name, he had used a number of methods to relieve his own ailments. As mentioned above, he sought both biomedical help and used Chinese folk medicine to deal with trachoma. In his battle against his anal fistula, Sung visited a hospital and Guanyin’s temple. His indulgence in multiple medical systems ceased in 1931, however, after he joined the Bethel Mission. For the next nine years of his life, Sung relied entirely on God for divine healing.

But renewed physical challenges at the end of his career forced Sung to discovered why so many who came to him for healing also sought help elsewhere. Divine healing was not an infallible cure. This became painfully obvious to Sung in his own body. His anal fistula never went away. Since his time in the United States, Sung suffered from the fistula, but after his evangelistic ministry began with the Bethel Mission, he had refused medical treatment. He believed to do so would undermine his message of divine healing. Instead, he redoubled his efforts at following his own prescription to receive divine healing. He furiously raked his own heart to uncover any unconfessed sins. For instance, he pled for mercy, admitting that he threw children out of his services if they
were disruptive; he exaggerated whenever he told his testimony—“hoping that people would be saved”; his devotional times had become mechanical; he stole God’s glory; he looked down on others and thought too highly of himself; and that the donations he collected through his evangelizing had not been given to God as holy.\textsuperscript{194}

When confession of sin brought no relief, Sung turned to self-care. He used a sharp stick to puncture the abscess that would form near his anus, and thereby find some relief as the pus drained. He had become the illustration from one of his own sermons. He was the woman who had bled for twelve years until the day she touched the hem of Jesus’ garment. Sung understood what it felt like to have vitality literally “flowing out of you.”\textsuperscript{195} But no matter how many times he reached out to Jesus, to touch the Bible, he was not made well. He took to washing his underwear in the privacy of his own room. He dearly wanted to hide the soggy mess he peeled off after every service. His diligence in the matter may have hidden the blood, but he could not disguise the weakness. In December 1939, Sung was so sick he preached lying down on a cot. By January, he was on a steamship back to Shanghai, so ill that his career as a revivalist-healer was over.

Even so, Sung never abandoned his belief in divine healing. Although the fistula had grown to be the width of a human fist, and had carved out a tunnel into his body a foot deep, Sung resisted medical intervention. Finally, with friends telling him that they had revelations from God that he needed to seek medical care, Sung reluctantly conceded

\textsuperscript{194} Song Shangjie, February 12, 1940, SSD, TTC.

\textsuperscript{195} Song Shangjie, “Zhiyao yangwang yesu,” 9.
his body not only to God, but also to physicians. For the last four years of his short life, 
the dual medical dynamic appeared in his journals. Sung might have a pastor come and 
anoint him with oil and pray for his healing in the morning, and then in the afternoon a 
doctor trained in biomedicine would visit him to clean his wound and administer an 
injection.196 Or, he would confess his sins before undergoing one of his six surgeries.197 

Without consciously meaning to, Sung had come to mimic the behavior of most 
of the people who had come to him for healing over the last ten years of his ministry. In 
printed testimonies of those who reported God’s touch through John Sung, many of the 
healed clearly wanted to praise God for God’s miraculous intervention in their lives. And 
yet the accounts of their physical recovery could not disguise the fact that even after Sung 
prayed for them, many of them had received medical help and physical healing from 
Western biomedicine, Chinese medicine, gongfu, the passing of time, or other means.198 
Sung may have preached that only divine healing was necessary, but in the end, he—like 
the members of his audience—pursued multiple healing options. When he made that 
concession, Sung came to view God’s mysterious work of physical healing as did so 
many others. Christian divine healing was a welcome new treatment, but as Francis Hsu 
observed about the fate other medical practices introduced to China over millennia, “if 
accepted at all, [they] would be considered as one among the many to be resorted to 

196 See, for example, Song Shangjie, February 12, 1940, SSD, TTC. 
197 Song Tianzhen, ed. The Diary of John Sung: Extracts from his Journals and Notes (Singapore: 
Genesis 2012), 355-412. 
198 Song Shangjie, ed., Quanguo jidutu budaotuan tuankan [National Christian Evangelistic 
simultaneously or sequentially with others.” By accepting that reality, Sung finally caught up with his audience who had indigenized his healing ministry much earlier; he joined them in treating divine healing in Jesus’ name according to local lifeways.

**Conclusion**

The healing arts were incredibly diverse in Republican China. Sung intersected with them at several points, and his ministry even demonstrated similarities with the ideas and ritual practices common to some forms of Chinese healing. Nonetheless, he did not indigenize his healing ministry by patterning his work on culturally familiar forms of medicine or by mimicking traditional religious healing systems.

Sung’s distinctive practice of divine healing had its origins in the holiness movement, Chinese Christian piety, and—thanks to advances in Western biomedicine, Chinese commercialism, and nationalistic propaganda—the growing belief in urban China that the body could and should be improved. These sources nourished his understanding of healing, and their influence on his audiences made Sung’s prayer for the sick a popular and prominent aspect of his mission to share the Good News.

Centered on confession, the divine healing Sung promoted could be obtained at anytime. It happened before, during, and after revival meetings. He never segregated divine healing from winning souls. It was a result of effective evangelism. Once sin was dealt with, sickness could be expunged too. The nature of the sickness did not matter.

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Sung left the diagnosis up to the supplicants who sought divine deliverance. They could speak of their ailments in biomedical terms, Chinese medical terms, or in religious terms. Whatever it was that afflicted the ill, Sung believed God could conquer it.

Sung’s confidence in God’s power was matched by those who ascended the platform during his services to testify to the miracles God had wrought. Some exclaimed God had completely delivered them from harm. Others gave thanks that God had made their sicknesses meaningful by integrating their suffering into of a grander scheme of redemption, even though full recovery eluded them. A third group testified that God had touched their bodies, but they spoke in borrowed language. Often uncertain as to whether or not they had been fully cured, this group of people relied on biblical phrases as they tried to walk by faith and not by sight.

For almost a decade Sung had done something similar. Despite the anal fistula he saw, Sung pursued no medical treatment. He had faith that God would heal him. When, however, his attempts to clear the path for God’s healing power through confession came to naught, Sung augmented his reliance on divine healing. First, he added a self-care technique. When that failed to rejuvenate his strength, Sung took a more dramatic turn. He submitted to Western biomedicine.

In his decision to rely on more than one medical system, Sung was a follower not a leader. Those who were not healed in his services had already cleared that trail. They had pursued other healing options, even as they might continue to pray for and claim divine healing. They indigenized his ministry, by treating it as they did their other
medical options. It was a viable alternative, but existed and could be used alongside many others.

That was a difficult and painful conclusion for Sung to reach. For years he had demanded undiluted allegiance to his cure. Divine healing was sufficient for everything that ailed a person. Only the voracious anal fistula that consumed his body and claimed his life in 1944 could cause a reassessment. After his sickness had brought his revival meetings to a halt, Sung somewhat reluctantly conceded that divine healing was one way of experiencing healing, but not the only way. Indigenization, for him, was coming to terms with the limitations of the divine healing he promoted. It need not be abandoned, but as so many of his patients discovered, neither did it need to monopolize the field. In that way, divine healing was absorbed into the indigenous medical habitat. Sung’s ministry of healing joined and flourished alongside the dazzling variety of other healing options available in China.
As 1930 drew to a close, Zhao Zechen [T. C. Chao], the prominent Chinese theologian at Yenjing University in Beijing, lamented: “There is a great lack of first-class educated, devout, eloquent, interesting preachers, people to carry the Christian message in modern terms, with modern applications.”\(^1\) New China, as he called it, needed new leadership. This required Christian communicators to guide the nation into the modern world. Or, even more to the point, China needed pastors who could deliver the country from its old superstitions.\(^2\) Such an evangelist, Zhao predicted, would be enormously popular and have a large following.\(^3\)

Although John Sung rose to national prominence only months later, Zhao could not recognize Sung as part of the answer to his appeal. In his mind, people like Sung appeared too embedded in China’s past. Faith healing and exorcisms were but more examples of ancient superstitions.\(^4\) Sung’s morality would have sounded to Zhao like the warmed-over Confucianism which the educated youth had already abandoned.\(^5\) Even Sung’s raucous presentation of the gospel would have had dubious appeal. How could he attract a modern audience if he did not stand before them as an intellectual lecturing on


\(^{2}\) Ibid., 63-64.

\(^{3}\) Ibid.

\(^{4}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{5}\) Peter Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 128.
Christianity’s role in saving the nation? Sung’s low-class gown and decision to speak like a traditional storyteller made him look like the antithesis of all that Zhao sought.

Yet a deeper analysis suggests Sung may have been closer to Zhao’s ideal than he imagined. Sung’s healing ministry, after all, was not merely a continuation of traditional Chinese patterns of religious healing. It was the product of new forces. The holiness movement and the modern confidence that the body could be improved fueled the demand for his healing touch. Similarly, Sung’s morality sounded traditional as he exalted the virtues of the countryside, and condemned innovations in entertainment and in the behavior of urban women. But, ultimately, Sung never tried to restore previous patterns for living. Instead, he focused on updating them for the modern cities that he, and his audiences, inhabited. The same can be said about Sung’s preaching. He may have looked like a local storyteller, but his message was animated by global revivalism.

This twin dynamic consistently appeared throughout Sung’s revivals. He combined the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, and their fusion made his services attractive for tens of thousands of Chinese. Ironically, the language of Sung’s revivalism, with its extreme dualisms, would seem to have made these combinations unlikely or even impossible. According to the logic of revivals, one would think that all the urbanites who were caught somewhere between Old China and New China, needed to hear but one message: Stop being lukewarm (Rev. 3:15-16)! Choose either one side or the other. But the power of Sung’s revivalism was in the paradox: when they chose salvation, they could keep both.
Such a generous offer is inherent to movements of revitalization. They make an old life and world live again, though in a reconstituted form. Few, if any, demonstrated that in China and Southeast Asia better than John Sung. Whether in his own personal life, or in his efforts for social renewal, he deftly employed revivalism to recreate a world in which he, and his listeners, could feel at home.
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