
Book Reviews

Daryl Ireland, *John Song: Modern Chinese Christianity and the Making of a New Man*, Waco, TX, United States: Baylor University Press, 2020, 268 pp., ISBN: 9781481312707, £36.00, paperback.

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Song Shangjie (1901-1944), also known as John Song or John Sung, was a prominent Chinese evangelist who played a key role in the revival movement in China and Southeast Asia in the 1920s and '30s. Song is often considered an example of an indigenous Christian leader and one of the most influential leaders of the Christian revival in China. He can rightfully be called the greatest Chinese evangelist of the twentieth century. Despite controversies surrounding his life and mission methodology, Song's influence in China and Southeast Asia remains palpable to this day.

Daryl Ireland, Research Associate Professor of Mission at Boston University School of Theology and the associate director of the university's Center for Global Christianity and Mission, is one of the foremost authorities on the life and work of John Song. His latest work is the culmination of years of research previously found in small publications and his 2015 dissertation on John Sung. He portrays the remarkable work of a Protestant preacher distinguished by emotive messages and extraordinary healings. Drawing from a wide array of English and Chinese sources, Ireland not only reconstructs a dynamic portrait of Song's personality, which underwent continual realignments in a process of self-discovery, but also traces the historical and cultural context of the tumultuous 1930s. Within these personal and historical contexts, Song's ever-evolving message becomes comprehensible: "Song created a Christianity for the New China—a faith that mobilized aspiring urbanites, including women,

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to choose a new life that could transform not only the heart but also the body” (10).

The book is divided into into seven chapters, with all chapters except the first interestingly tagged with the adjective “new” to signify Song’s realignments and focuses on different phases of his life. Chapter 1, “Dissolution,” briefly examines Song’s early years in Xinghua, Fujian, and delves into his seven tumultuous years in the United States, where he completed his chemistry studies at Ohio State University and showed signs of increasing mental instability, particularly during his tenure at the liberal Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York. Later, Song attempted to downplay the background of his Methodist upbringing and Christian education to emphasize the radical onset of his new life.

Chapter 2 delves into Song’s aspirations to become “A New Man” and proclaim this message to his audience by integrating an emotive conversion narrative into a “mythic narrative framework” (38). His personal conflict with UTS and his testimony were interwoven into a larger framework of theological conflict of his time, the fundamentalist-modernist controversies, which divided Protestants in China. Contrary to preceding hagiographic portrayals largely uncritically embraced by many Chinese Christians to this day, Ireland seeks to trace the historical Song through his dynamic religious transformation process. “The new man” evolved into a symbol of revival, carrying a message of ecstatic liberation and renewal, promising a new hope of radical change.

Chapter 3 examines Song’s use of “New Means,” particularly revivalist preaching and mobilization techniques that blended traditional Chinese storytelling techniques with modern revival preaching methods and reached a broad Chinese audience. The development of Song’s ministry methods was traced to his involvement in the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band of Shi Meiyi and Kang Cheng in 1931. Ireland demonstrates how Song’s polarizing message mobilized new converts for evangelism, presenting it as “the last and most important step in the order of salvation” (86).

Chapter 4 (“New Location”) focuses on Song’s independent service in urban China, particularly in Tianjin, after his departure from the Bethel Band, shedding light on his connections with urban elites and the influence of nationalist-political developments on his ministry. His condemnation of sins often corresponded with the ideals propagated by the nationalist government through its New Life Movement (*xin shenghuo yundong*). While

Song mingled with elitist circles due to the support needed for his service, he also sought to engage with the lower classes (111).

Seamlessly transitioning to chapter 5 (“A New Audience”), Ireland describes Song’s shift in focus to the major cities and his audience, especially the urban petty bourgeoisie (*xiaoshimin*). In this context, Ireland demonstrates how Song tailored his message of sin and redemption to address four fears, namely, poverty, violence, disease, and boredom (118). He presented redemption as a nostalgic restoration of idealized rural values to create an emotional connection with his target audience.

Chapter 6 (“A New Woman”) highlights Song’s strong impact on diasporic Chinese women in Singapore in 1935. He emphasizes the positive role of women in the evangelistic service, providing a spiritual rationale for why they can contribute publicly to the common good outside the home (149). Song’s encouragement for women, who felt alienated in the diaspora context and suffered from the constraints of traditional gender roles, led to the establishment of evangelistic teams dominated by women.

In chapter 7 (“A New Body”), Song’s healing ministry is examined as an integral part of his service since the earliest days in the Bethel Band. Viewing himself as a channel and instrument for the Spirit of God to bring healing to Christians, he merged Chinese and pentecostal notions of illness and emphasized that healing should follow public confession of sins. This underscores Song’s conviction that “holy people were to be healthy people, and he was the person through which God would produce both” (185).

A major strength of the book lies in the utilization of previously unknown documentary and archival primary sources, including Song’s notes during his time in the USA, which Ireland carefully and critically evaluates. This captures the dynamic development of Song’s character, which has been overshadowed in general church discourse by a static, stringent personality profile. Ireland’s contextualization of Song’s life and work in a turbulent era marked by cultural tension, sociopolitical crisis, and theological debate, lends credibility to Song’s message and missionary successes, providing a comprehensive portrayal of arguably China’s greatest evangelist.

Due to the limited scope and the selective approach, however, significant portions of Song’s life story are indeed missing from this academically exemplary work. At some points, one wishes for more cross-references to contemporary evangelical movements such as Watchman Nee’s “Little

Flock.” Nevertheless, my main critique is directed at Ireland’s central thesis, which he revisits in the final sentence of the book: “To know the story of John Song and how he became a New Man is to understand the formation of modern Chinese Christianity” (207). While Ireland attempts a comparison of Song’s influential ministry with contemporary Chinese Christianity in a few pages (203-207) and identifies four overlapping aspects—Song’s charismatic narrative style, his popular healing ministry, his powerful evangelistic fervor, and the distinctly urban nature of his ministry—these characteristics are so general that they could belong to any pentecostal movement worldwide and do not necessarily represent Song’s distinctive work. Moreover, it is essential to clarify whether these aspects, including the healing ministry, genuinely reflect present-day Chinese Christianity and to what extent these particularities might have originated from Song. These considerations should encourage further future research efforts.

This overall excellent biography of John Song is aimed at all mission experts and lay readers interested in missiology and world Christianity. Ireland has provided one of the clearest, most vivid depictions of John Song to date through his thorough research and lucid presentation. It makes a significant contribution to the study of global Christianity. As part of the Baylor Studies in World Christianity series, it offers a comprehensive introduction to early twentieth-century Chinese Christianity, combining archival strengths with an engaging writing style and insightful analyses. It is essential reading for all interested parties and a valuable resource for scholars and students across various disciplines related to modern China and Chinese Christianity.

About Reviewer

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