

Asia

John Song: Modern Chinese Christianity and the making of a new man

By DARYL R. IRELAND

Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020. Pp. xix + 248. Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463421000369

During John Song's (1901–44) preaching career, a mere 12 years spanning from 1928–40, over 10 per cent of all Chinese Protestants responded to his evangelistic message to be 'born again'. The significant impact of Song and his evangelistic tours begs for objective, historical analysis. Daryl Ireland's book provides this and much more. This is the most successful scholarly attempt to understand the appeal of John Song and to contextually examine the life of China's most famous evangelist. Through seven chapters, in addition to an introduction and conclusion, Ireland crafts a compelling narrative that introduces Song to historians of China and World Christianity who may not be familiar with his influence, and reshapes the understanding that scholars of Chinese Christianity have of the evangelist.

There are three particular strengths in this book. It situates Song in modern Chinese history, presents an objective account of the evangelist, and creatively merges primary and secondary literature. First, Ireland successfully contextualises the life of Song into the broader fabric of Chinese society in the second quarter of the twentieth century. He begins the volume with a discussion of the May 4th Movement and each chapter is clearly connected to the theme of China in the midst of transition. The chapters largely move in chronological order, but this is not a standard biography. Instead, Ireland weaves Song's life, and particularly his career as an evangelist, together with issues such as urbanisation, gender, medicine, and the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia.

Second, the reader is left feeling confident in the scholarship and objective portrayal of Song. This is particularly significant because of the proliferation of hagiographic accounts of Song's life. This book is a brave portrayal of Song because most previous accounts are clearly from an evangelical viewpoint that often neglect in-depth analysis of more problematic aspects of Song's background and ministry. One main controversial issue is how to understand Song's mental health challenges while a seminary student at Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York. Song received a bachelor's degree and PhD in Ohio before moving to the seminary at UTS in 1926. In New York he had an apparent mental breakdown and was placed in an institution for six months. The standard evangelical portrayal of Song's mental health issues has been to emphasise the liberal theology of UTS, suggesting that Song's commitment to a more fundamentalist view of the Bible was the impetus behind the institutionalisation. However, Ireland reveals how Song's diaries reflect a troubled man. For instance, while institutionalised, Song believed there was a hidden radio code embedded in the text of the four gospels and he spent days trying to decipher the complex code. Even more disconcerting was that Song recorded in his diary a special relationship he had with Mary, the mother of Christ, who he believed shared intimate secrets with him, such as 'the failures of Jesus Christ' (p. 23). Song claims to have married Mary (who he referred to in English as Holy Mother and in Chinese as

shenmu 神母), and confessed that he hated to stop kissing her. Ireland covers other controversial aspects of Sung's life and ministry, but these discussions are supported by objective analysis and reliable scholarship.

Sung was prolific at journaling, daily keeping a record of his activities and inner thoughts, including the numbers of attendees at his campaigns and requests for healing he received. However, until recently, these journals were not available for scholars. Since the 1990s, portions of the diaries have been published or referenced, but Ireland shows that these snippets were closely curated and did not present a complete picture of the evangelist. Over the decades, Ireland refers to Sung's story as a 'Rorschach test' in that 'people could see in it what they wanted' (p. xiv). This book, however, is the first scholarly account to base its analysis on unfettered access to the journals — over 6,000 pages that are now housed at Yale Divinity School. The result is a more sophisticated portrayal of Sung that this reader felt was both scholarly and fair. In addition to relying on Sung's journals, Ireland seamlessly relates these to larger scholarship on modern Chinese history. The extensive use of secondary sources, not only on Sung, but more broadly on Chinese society in the twentieth century, is to be applauded.

It may be surprising to some that Ireland chooses 'John Song', instead of 'John Sung', which is more common in English. In the Introduction, he clarifies that this decision will help those looking at Chinese sources, which would refer to the evangelist as Song Shangjie 宋尚節. However, many scholars already familiar with Sung will find this name change a bit confusing. Some readers of this journal may feel disappointed at the overwhelming focus on mainland China. Song clearly spent most of his time as a preacher in urban centres of coastal China, but his influence and memory may have been (and may still be) strongest in Southeast Asia. However, Ireland only discusses this in chapter 6 (and then another short mention in chapter 7), and it is largely in the context of the role of women in Sung's campaigns. Despite these minor misgivings, this is an important book that is carefully organised and based on skilful research. It deserves to be read by all historians of modern China and those interested in World Christianity. It could easily be adopted for use in a number of undergraduate or graduate classes.

CHRIS WHITE

Purdue University

Southeast Asia

The making of a periphery: How Island Southeast Asia became a mass exporter of labor

By ULBE BOSMA

New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. 240. Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S002246342100045X

This is an ambitious work that traverses pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial years in Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. A short review scarcely does justice