

BOOK REVIEW

IRELAND, Daryl R. *John Song: Modern Chinese Christianity and the Making of a New Man*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020. xix + 248 pp. Hbk. ISBN: 9781481312707. £36.

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Song Shangjie (1901–44), also known as John Sung, was arguably the most effective and best-known Chinese evangelist of the twentieth century. He lived and ministered in China in the turbulent years of the 1930s. I have elsewhere described him as representing a type of Protestant, even fundamentalist, preacher who accepted spiritual gifts and was particularly renowned as a healing evangelist with remarkable healings reported. He drew many thousands to his meetings in the Chinese mainland and among the Chinese diaspora throughout Southeast Asia. Daryl Ireland's book is the definitive study of the life and times of this remarkable figure, whose life was cut short at the age of 42. This book is not, however, a conventional biography. It is more about how and why John Song changed his message so many times to create a new one, changing with his circumstances. In his preface, Ireland states the rationale for his book: "Today, to look at John Song is to see and understand how modern Chinese Christianity first emerged and why it has grown so dramatically" (p. xvi). Ireland takes the biographical details of Song and the surrounding social and historical context of the first half of the century in China as the background for understanding this new type of Chinese Christianity that predominates in Chinese Protestantism today.

The book follows the theme of "new" with each chapter dealing with the ways in which Song "reinvented" and sometimes contradicted himself as his circumstances changed. The chapters are roughly chronological, but large parts of the life history are missing. After the introduction, the first chapter deals with "dissolution". Although Song was born in the home of a Methodist preacher in Xinghua, Fujian, in southeast China, he later sought to downplay his Christian upbringing to emphasize the new life he had received. Because so little is known of his early life, the chapter moves quickly to his seven eventful years in the United States, where Ireland has unearthed a treasure of documentary evidence hitherto unknown. Song went to Ohio State University, graduating with a doctorate in chemistry in 1926 after only three years. The final traumatic year in the United States included a semester at Union Theological Seminary, New York, when he showed signs of increasing mental illness. After a "breakdown" (which he always claimed was a mistaken diagnosis for a spiritual experience), bizarre

communications with the seminary followed, with his letters and diaries revealing a troubled mind. After six months in a psychiatric hospital, he returned to China in November 1927. He later reported that he had burned all his theological books and renounced theological education; the records indicate, however, that he wanted to return to the seminary but was denied.

For the next thirteen years, until ill health overcame him, he devoted himself exclusively to evangelism and healing, bringing at least 100,000 to conversion (some estimates are considerably more) and revival to hundreds of churches. Ireland traces the profiles of some of these converts. The chapters that follow demonstrate how Song sought to become “A New Man” and proclaim this message to his hearers (chapter 2), and used “A New Means” for saving the Chinese nation, which was revivalist evangelism, at first with the Bethel Band (chapter 3). Subsequent chapters cover “A New Location”, where the study focuses on Song’s ministry in Tianjin (chapter 4); “A New Audience”, showing how Song concentrated on the large cities (chapter 5); “A New Woman”, discussing the new role of women in Song’s ministry and in Chinese society, here concentrating on his work in Singapore (chapter 6); and finally, “A New Body”, a study on Song’s healing ministry (chapter 7), followed by a brief conclusion. Song had an indefatigable preaching schedule throughout China and Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Burma. Wherever he went, his diary recorded hundreds of conversions and healings from all kinds of afflictions. His hundreds of meetings (usually three a day with two hours of preaching in each service) were characterized by drama and emotion, including theatrics and vivid illustrations on the platform, vigorous clapping, spontaneous prayer in unison and free-flowing tears. Song dressed in an informal long Chinese shirt and often appeared dishevelled. His revivalist preaching appealed to common people, demanded repentance from moral vices, and was accompanied by revival songs, emotional scenes and exorcizing demons. Numerous cases of healing in Song’s ministry were reported, with overwhelming numbers of people lining up for prayer for healing and exorcism in his meetings. Wherever he went he set up evangelistic teams to continue the work he had started and hundreds of these teams, the majority being women, operated throughout China and Southeast Asia. He became an international figure, but his many critics charged him with fanaticism, emotionalism and even insanity.

There is not a lot in this book about Song’s “Pentecostal” tendencies, but Song would undoubtedly be regarded as “Charismatic” today. Ireland writes that “Pentecostals temporarily led Song to associate God’s transformative presence with speaking in tongues” (p. 184), but that he later cautioned against Pentecostal excesses. Although he may have had an ambivalent relationship with Pentecostals, his ministry most certainly was characterized by Pentecostal phenomena and he preached in Pentecostal churches. He was a healing evangelist who not only was baptized by immersion in 1932 in Hong Kong, regularly prayed in tongues (a gift he first received in March 1934), and prayed for the sick during every campaign, but he also exercised a gift of knowledge and prophecy during his preaching. With the gift of knowledge, he would speak out about personal details of people in his audience without contact with them beforehand. He was

also reported to use predictive prophecy, and his diary records his occasional visions. His view on tongues was that it was the least of the gifts, but that every Christian should be filled with the Spirit. Like Pentecostals, he saw this as an experience after conversion, prayed for people to receive the experience, and taught that it should be accompanied by receiving love and at least one of the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit listed in 1 Corinthians 12. Song prophesied that there would be a great revival in China after the missionaries left and after the Chinese church had suffered greatly. Despite his often-searing outbursts against Western missionaries, Song was welcomed in Western-founded churches (usually evangelical ones), and occasionally was invited by the missionaries themselves. In 1940 Song was forced to give up his heavy travelling and preaching schedule when diagnosed with cancer. He died in 1944 at the age of 42 after several major operations. Song's impact on Chinese Christianity was enormous. Not only was he spiritual father to many thousands of Chinese Christians, but his style of integrating emotional prayer with fundamentalist evangelism is now dominant in Chinese Protestant Christianity. Ireland's book is full of documentary, archival evidence to support his findings, evidence that has not been published before. This is the strength of this publication; but for anyone interested in Chinese Christianity, it has wider relevance and is essential reading. As Ireland reminds us again in the very last sentence of this book: "To know the story of John Song and how he became a New Man is to understand the formation of modern Chinese Christianity" (p. 207).