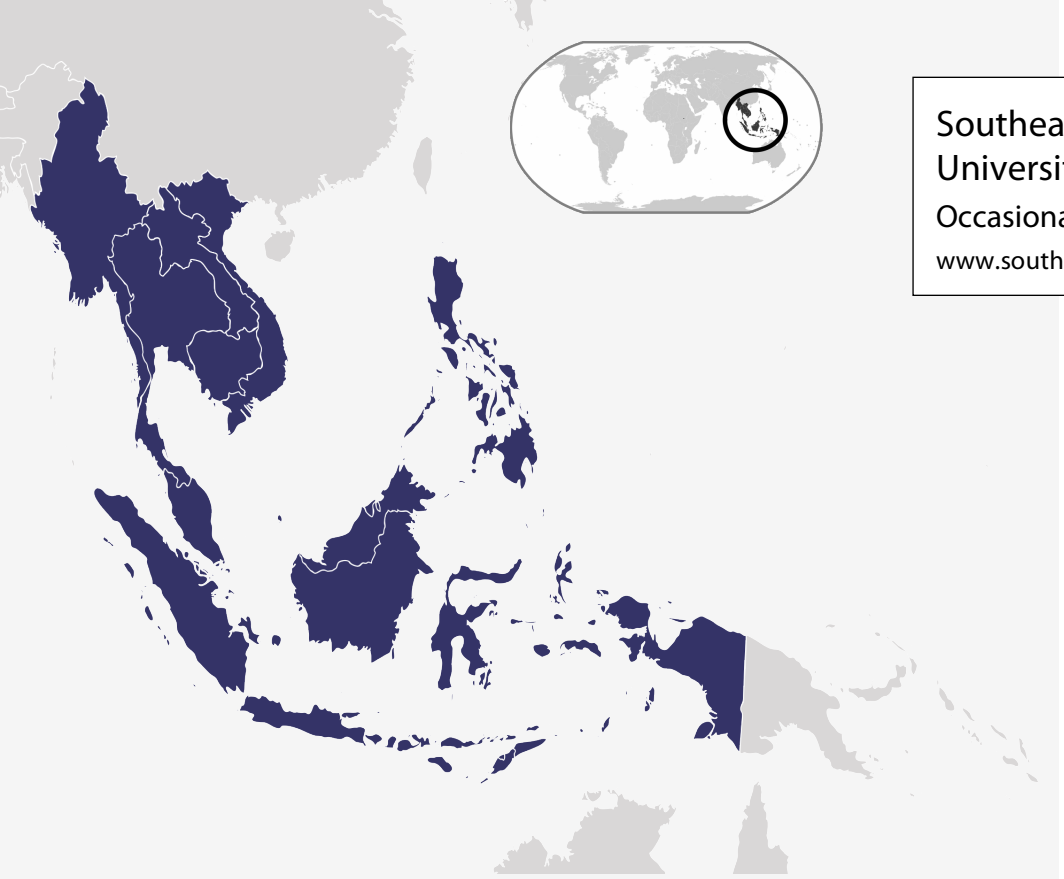

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"Come Home, Come Home!" – Chineseness, John Sung and Theatrical Evangelism in 1930s Southeast Asia

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Barbara Watson Andaya (University of Hawai'i)*

Abstract

Although any idea that the Chinese of Southeast Asia can be treated as a monolithic group has long since been discarded, in many cases the differences of dialect and culture were overcome by the adoption of Christianity. At the same time, conversion to Christianity also activated an uneasy tension between maintaining a Chinese identity and affiliation with a "Western" religion. In considering the historical interaction between religion and ethnicity, this paper focuses on Singapore, British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies during the 1930s, when a Christian revivalist movement generated a wave of converts who also experienced a new sense of Chineseness. The focus will be the missiology methods adopted by the evangelist John Sung (1901-44), who had studied in United States but became disenchanted with Western theology. His remarkable appeal among overseas Chinese communities coincided with a time of global economic chaos and rising Asian nationalism. In this climate of uncertainty Sung's reputation as a spiritually powerful individual who could heal the sick, expel evil spirits and foretell the future was a major source of attraction. This essay, however, concentrates on his innovative preaching style and his compelling presentation of the evangelical message, which laid the ground for a major expansion of Christian Chinese populations in Southeast Asia. But although John Sung's evangelism helped bridge the gap between Chinese dialect communities, Western-educated Chinese Christians were more wary. More particularly, his success contributed to the intertwining of Chinese ethnicity and religious difference that in Muslim-majority Indonesia and Malaysia still resurfaces as an unresolved and destabilizing problematic.

Key words

John Sung, Evangelism, Chinese Christians

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Introduction

In 1950, in his pioneering study, the Sinologist Victor Purcell remarked that "the Chinese of Southeast Asia are, in essence, the same people over the entire area" (Purcell 1951, 656). While this may be true in general terms, Purcell himself recognized the importance of dialect, class, occupation and intermarriage in complicating this picture of cultural unity. Southeast Asians themselves understood these differences, and a Khmer law code from the seventeenth century even refers to Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochieu, Hainanese, while Chinese observers also acknowledged the diverse origins of overseas Chinese and the changes that acculturation and intermarriage brought about (Mikaelian 2009, 336; Kong 1987, 454; Salmon 2003, 46). Against this background, one could argue that conversion to Christianity created another "category" of Chinese distinguished from their countrymen, forming an identifiable community that became especially visible in the colonized countries of Southeast Asia, the "Southern Seas" or Nanyang. Undoubtedly internal divisions in this broad "Christian Chinese" category remained, even among people from the same area in China, and there was a recurring debate among missionaries about whether preaching should be in Mandarin or in local *lingua franca*, such as Hokkien (Harrison 1979, 86-8). Nonetheless, despite the persistence of such differences, the evidence shows that the attraction of a common belief system – in this case, Christianity – had the capacity to draw Chinese of various origins together.

In the nineteenth century the Christianity that circulated through Asia carried its own baggage. It may have attracted those Chinese for whom conversion was linked to "modernity" and an entrée to a larger globalizing world, but in Southeast Asia it was also associated with colonial powers. For many Chinese, who saw ancestral altars condemned and Chinese pastors preaching in Western suits, conversion appeared to entail cultural rejection as well. The following discussion takes up this question by considering the ways in which a charismatic individual could overcome linguistic barriers among overseas Chinese while conveying the message that they could adopt Christianity and still retain their cultural roots. It does so by focusing on the career of the evangelical Chinese preacher, Shangjie Sung (1901-44), otherwise known as John Sung, regarded as one of Asia's most influential evangelists and recently the focus of renewed attention (Poon 2010, xviii-xxv). In discussing his revivalist meetings among overseas Chinese communities in British Malaya, Singapore and the Dutch East Indies between 1935 and 1939, this essay argues that a primary reason for Sung's extraordinary appeal was his innovative preaching style that spoke directly to Chinese concerns in an uncertain economic and political climate. Injecting his sermons with a power that was dramatically compelling, his "theatrical" (and for many Western missionaries, controversial) deliveries were a key factor in attracting audiences of thousands of people. Nevertheless, although the nationalism and "Chineseness" of John Sung's evangelism helped bridge the gap between Chinese dialect communities, Western-educated Chinese Christians were more wary. In the Muslim-majority countries of the Netherlands Indies and in British Malaya Sung's very success contributed to the intertwining of Chinese ethnicity and religious difference that in modern Indonesia and Malaysia still resurfaces as an unresolved and destabilizing problematic.

The Church as an "Ecclesiastical theater" and the Ramifications for Asian Missionizing

The debate surrounding Sung's dramatic preaching style, seen by many Western missionaries as "emotional debauchery" (Xi 2010, 85-6), has a long history. The Portuguese

and Spanish missionaries who arrived in Asia in the sixteenth century came from an environment where the Catholic orders, notably the Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians had developed sermons into a potent means for instructing uneducated peasantry (Melvin 2012, 9-1,121). Speaking in the vernacular rather than Latin, the most successful preachers were those who delivered short but dramatic homilies and conveyed Christian teaching by drawing on anecdotes and folklore that were clearly related to the life of the people. Many became skilled actors through their mastery of rhetorical skills and exploitation of images and religious symbols, transforming the church environment into what one authority has called an "ecclesiastical theater" (Barnes-Karol 1992, 52-77). Understandably, then, the first priority of the renowned missionary Francis Xavier after his arrival in Melaka in 1546 was to learn sufficient Malay so that he could preach to local societies in what he believed was a regional *lingua franca*. In the Spanish Philippines the same motivations lay behind the assiduous acquisition of local languages by the friars of the various Catholic orders. It was also common for missionaries in the Philippines to use illustrations or "props" (such as setting light to a paper to demonstrate hellfire) in order to give life and color to their sermons (Cushner 1971, 91). However, among theological circles the very similarities between a preacher and an actor led to vociferous debate, with Jesuits particularly loud in their condemnation of any effort to compare the pulpit to a stage (Cañadas 2005, 44-5; Selwyn 2004, 221-3). Catholic missionaries in the Philippines were therefore always anxious to draw a line between activities that might appear to bridge the gap between secular and sacred by bringing "theater" into the Church (Irving 2010, 201-2).

If anything, the Reformation saw a strengthening of these attitudes among Protestants, who often condemned Catholicism for its "theatrical" rituals, and from the mid-sixteenth century opposition to the "immorality" of the professional stage became more outspoken (Alexander 2001, 57-95; Sager 2013, 96-7). The Calvinist-style Christianity brought to Southeast Asia by the Dutch East India Company was thus a product of a tradition that emphasized oral preaching of "the word", but that saw the delivery of a sermon from a carefully crafted written text as the most effective way of teaching Christianity. It was for this reason, therefore, that the sermons of François Caron (in often questionable Malay) were written and read out to a frequently uncomprehending audience, especially when ministers were unavailable (Abineno, 1956, 32). In the Netherlands East Indies Caron's collection was still delivered from Church pulpits well into the nineteenth century, although by this time many clerics in Europe favored a more "extemporaneous" delivery rather than relying on a pre-written or memorized sermon. One of the most famous exemplars of this new style of preaching, often held outdoors, was John Wesley (1703-91), founder of Methodism. His capacity to generate "dramatic outpourings of emotion" among thousands of listeners exemplified, in his words, "the religion of the heart" (Lenz 1992, 115). Emotional feeling was even more evident in the sermons of his contemporary, George Whitefield (1714-70), today remembered particularly for his revival meetings in the American colonies. Trained in the theater, Whitefield's dramatic skills and his theatrical performance of biblical episodes aroused admiration even among seasoned actors like David Garrick, and his techniques were widely imitated (Maddock 2012, 97-98; Mahaffey 2011, 2, 13, 20-7).

Nonetheless, though effective in attracting congregations, the emotional excitement generated by this type of evangelism was consistently censured by mainstream churches. Even a gifted preacher like the British Baptist C.H. Spurgeon (1834-1892) could be criticized for his "theatricality", although this was muted in the collections of sermons that he and many other ministers published (Ellison 1998, 39-42, 73-4). In the churches of British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, where the practice of reading or reciting from a written copy was

well established, originality in the presentation of sermons was not valued. Among the criticisms launched against the Javanese Christian, Kiay Sadrach, was his use of personal experience rather than a biblical text in his preaching (Partonadi, 1990, 133).

The popularity of the extemporaneous sermon, however, was gathering pace, in part because of an unprecedented upsurge in working-class religiosity and the participation of congregations in worship services. Evangelical revivalism, best exemplified in the rise of Methodism, placed a new value on communal singing, and on the introduction of the "human hymn" that used Christian exhortations which all could understand set to tunes that all could sing (Temperley and Banfield, 2010; M. Anderson, 2012). Music, unconventional preaching, emotional praise-giving and group prayer were also a feature of the Welsh revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when even pastors renowned for their sermons allowed anyone "moved by the Spirit" to stand up and speak (Penn-Lewis 2012, 95). However, the greatest challenge to the formal liturgy of established churches came with the rise of American Pentecostalism. Normally linked to the interracial Los Angeles Azusa Street Revival of 1906, the deeper roots of the Pentecostal movement can be located in the emotionalism associated with a more participatory Christianity that had its greatest appeal among less educated and lower socio-economic groups (Anderson 2004, 35: Anderson 2013).

Christian Revivals in China and the Early Life of John Sung

The expanding influence of American revivalism coincided with major developments in China. The fall of the Qing dynasty and the creation of a republic led to the conviction among Western missionaries (particularly in the United States) that China was opening up as a great new mission field where fostering "a mighty outpouring of the Spirit" could potentially convert the entire country (Taylor 1906, 295; Anderson 2013, 66). By the 1920s and 30s increased evangelism intersected with a Chinese-led surge of Christian revivalism. Sweeping across several areas of China, this revivalist movement saw the emergence of influential Chinese preachers like *Watchman Nee* Duo Sheng (1903-72) and indigenous churches like the True Jesus Church (Bays 1993; Bays 2012, 92-141; Tiedemann 2012).

Westerners with Pentecostal links were closely involved with these developments, and as early as 1909 Pentecostal-style meetings were being held in Hinghua where Sung grew up. While Sung did not agree with all Pentecostal practices (he was ambiguous about speaking with tongues, for instance), his diary notes that "I often pray that the Holy Spirit of Pentecost will also work mightily in the meetings that I conduct" (Sung 2008, 6-7, 450-1). Though criticized by mainstream Western missionaries and their Chinese counterparts, who used terms such as "disorderly", "raucous" and "primitive" to describe Chinese revival meetings, many lay Chinese preachers were catapulted into positions of spiritual leadership, often circumventing both the authority and the teachings of Western missionaries (Bays 2012, 134; Xi 2010, 85-6).

The background of these revivals, which came during a turbulent period of Chinese history, has been explored by several historians (Bays 1993; Bays 2012, 128-38). Here, however, I direct my attention to the enhanced role of "performative religion" in early twentieth century evangelism as it affected overseas Chinese communities that had not themselves experienced the "indigenous" Christianity of China. I argue that the crusades of Shangjie Sung successfully integrated influences from both sides of the Pacific into a unique preaching style in which the power of the spoken word was reinforced by his ability to appeal to the particular concerns of overseas Chinese at a specific historic moment. I also

argue, however, that this influence was most evident in Singapore, British Malaya and Indonesia, where a sense of being "Chinese " ran high but where independent Chinese congregations were relatively free from the influence of Western missionaries.

Born in Fujian as the son of a Methodist pastor, Shangjie Sung began preaching even as a child, relying, he said, not on a written tract but on his "memory and boldness." What he later termed his "oratorical skills" became a hallmark of his public deliveries (Sung 2008, 9-10, 35). Through the intervention of a missionary Sung received a scholarship in 1921 to study theology at Ohio Wesleyan University, but turned to chemistry, graduating in 1923 as Phi Beta Kappa. He then registered for a Ph.D. at Ohio State where he was President of the International Students Association, one aim of which was to oppose the color bar – an indication that he had some interaction with African Americans (Lyall 2004, 33). During this period Sung's English improved to the extent that he became involved in lay preaching (he often spoke English to Chinese from other language groups), and he used his talents as a singer and musician to good effect. After much soul-searching, he decided to abandon an academic career and enroll in Union Theological College. Here his disillusionment with liberal interpretations of the Bible contributed to a psychological breakdown, but after several months in hospital he underwent a "spiritual rebirth." In 1927 he returned to China with his conservative Christianity confirmed, and embarked on a new career as an itinerant musician-evangelist (Tow 1985; Lyall 2004; Lim 2012).

The seven years Sung spent in the United States was a time of extreme religious ferment, particularly in regard to charismatic evangelism. Influential preachers like Billy Sunday (1862-1935) and the Canadian-born Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944) had established new modes of presenting Christian teachings in theatrical form, effectively abandoning the pulpit for the stage. Sunday, formerly a professional baseball player, rose to prominence as an evangelist whose energetic and dramatic sermons also included anecdotal metaphors drawn from his previous experiences as a national baseball player. His reputation reached as far as China, where it was said that one young man was converted simply by reading a newspaper report about Sunday (Martin 2002; Ellis 1917, 63). Aimee Semple McPherson, like Whitefield two hundred years earlier, had originally planned on an acting career, but after her conversion had decided to go to China as a missionary. Following the death of her husband in Hong Kong she returned to the United States to become a nationally renowned preacher whose dramatic talent and use of staging – lighting, sounds, costumes, and props – were central to her reputation as the "prima donna of revivalism" (Blumhofer 1993, 262; Sutton 2007, 74).

While these influences are evident in John Sung's own preaching, his diaries record his specific impressions not of an adult, but of a young girl, Uldine Utley, the most well known of the numerous female preachers who emerged during the 1920s. As a child Utley had hoped to become a Hollywood actor, even joining a drama club, but after her conversion at the age of nine she came known for her oratory, the effectiveness of her public prayer and her emphasis on salvation, divine healing and baptism by the Holy Spirit (Du Mez, 2005: Robinson and Ruff, 2011, 5, 94; Lim 2012, 62-3). Though she was sometimes called "the girl Billy Sunday", there was little here that was reminiscent of either Sunday's masculine energy or the theater-like atmosphere of McPherson's meetings, apart from the emphasis on music. Nevertheless, those who perceived Utley as a manifestation of innocence and purity were also witnessing what was essentially a staged performance. Almost invariably dressed in white, Utley used a flower (typically a single rose) as a visual motif, inserting it as a book mark in her white vellum bible. In maintaining the association, she likened herself to the "Rose of Sharon" and her prayers and sermons to "petals" (Du Mez, 2005, 215-16). In the

fragile mental state that preceded his breakdown, Sung was deeply affected by her message of a "sweet and kindly gospel" and by her use of singing and song books as a revival strategy. He went back four times to hear Utley preach, describing her as "an embodiment of spiritual depth, vitality and power" (Du Mez, 2005, 217-18; Lim 2012, 62, 108; Sung 2008, 41).

Given Sung's musical skills, his association with African Americans during his student days, and his membership in a University-based Gospel band, it is also relevant to note that this period also saw the rise of Black Gospel music, publicly endorsed by the National Baptist Convention at its 1930 meeting (*John Sung* 2011, 61; Costen 2004, 86-7). When Sung returned to China he joined the "Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band," which provided religious music – "happy, catchy choruses" – that were in high demand for revival meetings. One missionary even compared the tunes at his meetings to "negro spirituals" (Xi 2010, 131; Baarbé 2011, 56). By the time the band was dissolved in 1935 it had visited 133 cities and travelled over 50,000 miles. Arguably the most popular member was Sung himself, an "evangelistic tornado," whose reputation was based not merely on his oratorical and musical skills, but on a belief that he possessed remarkable healing powers (Bays 2012, 137; Lim 2012, 139; Blumhofer and Balmer, 1993, 172).

Although Sung angrily rejected any effort to portray his preaching as theatrical (Lyall 2004, 238), he had in a sense already cast himself as a new "character." During his time in the United States, and as result of his "rebirth" as a Christian, he had taken on a new name, John, because of the similarity he saw between himself and John the Baptist. In his sermons he often drew comparisons between himself and the earlier "forerunner of the Lord," reminding his listeners that he too dressed simply, his long white Chinese robe a marked contrast to the Western clothing worn by most Chinese pastors. Like John the Baptist, Sung said, he ate to survive rather than for pleasure (no ice-cream, for instance), and he too preached without fear of the consequences. For example, he aroused considerable ire among Western missionaries, whom he said dominated the Chinese church and whom he termed "false prophets" because of their liberal interpretation of the Bible (*John Sung* 2011, 95; Ong 1941, 9-10).

Although any such comparison would have been unacceptable to Sung and would still be rejected by many of his admirers, it is difficult to avoid attributing the impact of his emotion-filled meetings to the performative aspect. This line of thinking is also useful because the idea that "preaching and theatre share a great deal of ground" is currently more widely accepted among those who specialize in homiletics. It is evident that in many respects Sung adopted the kinds of techniques now advocated by those who believe that a preacher should "perform" the text in order to bring it to life (Childers 1998 9, 49-52; Brown 2000, 82, 247). His dramatic preaching style interspersed group prayer with interactive music and singing, while employing metaphors and references familiar to the Chinese so that Bible passages became more relevant. Combining sarcastic denunciations, exuberant humor, agonized prayer, vivid acting, lively hymn-singing, altar calls for salvation and sometimes the drama of a miracle healing, his revival campaigns attracted thousands. At the same time, his public humiliation of often prominent people through accusations of "sinfulness" and his use of what one scholar has called an "abrasive" and "rude" style is actually remarkably similar to the reality shows so popular in contemporary American television and radio. One cannot help but speculate if such confrontational methods, so opposed to fundamental Chinese traditions, attracted audiences simply because they were so shocking (Bays 1993, 315: Blumhofer and Balmer, 1993, 172).

As one might expect, Sung encountered considerable criticism from mainstream clergy,

both Western and Chinese, who saw his approach as unacceptably fundamentalist, obsessively concerned with sin, personality focused and emotionally exploitative – in short, a "degraded" Christianity (Zia 1936, 408-12; Hunter and Chan 2007, 131-2, 147). In the words of one hostile observer, Sung was a "religious zealot" who

> *waved his arms, stamped his foot, screamed like a travelling medicine peddler. He didn't wait for the translator to finish before he launched into another sentence . . . the longer he went on, the more excited he became, stamping his foot and calling out to heaven – Oh God – which made him foam at the mouth and caused sweat to drip from his body. . . He used the philosophy of withdrawal from this world and a passive approach to life as an anesthetic* (*One Day* 1983, 186-7).

Nonetheless, by 1932 Sung's travels across eighteen provinces had transformed him from a young rural preacher to a "countrywide evangelist" whose evangelical meetings became an occasion where the combination of spiritual engagement, group participation and simple entertainment bore many similarities to traditional Chinese cult practices (Lim 2012, 173). It was this reputation that provides the essential background to understanding the significance of his "epic mission journeys" to Southeast Asia (Hoon 2013, 166).

John Sung in Southeast Asia

Sung's early diaries refer to a "relative" in the Nanyang, and to an early invitation to take up a position as a teacher (Sung 2008, 56), but his visits to Southeast Asia came as a result of close connections between southern Chinese Christians and the Nanyang, where the Chinese population in 1930-1 has been estimated at four million (Ananta and Arifin 2004, 74). Personal networks, the arrival of Chinese teachers to staff Chinese-language schools, and the testimonials of "blessed ones" in Fujian and Guandong, meant that his name was already well known (Sung 2008, 56, 308). Admittedly the response to Sung's first overseas trip to Manila in May 1935 was disappointing, but it was a very different story a few months later when he spent two months in Singapore, Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies. He received a particularly enthusiastic welcome in Singapore and British Malaya, where a massive influx of contract workers between 1880 and 1930 had resulted in large numbers of China-born and Chinese speaking communities. However, the Depression had brought immigration restrictions and the deportation of contract workers, and the remaining poor and rootless China-born migrants were ready to be drawn into a new and supportive community. Even existing Chinese churches had suffered as congregations shrank, revenues declined and Chinese-speaking ministers were unavailable. In Singapore, for example the Hokkien church at Jurong was deserted, and only monthly services were held (Loh 1963, 19). Sung therefore arrived at an opportune time, as attested by the size of his audiences and the numbers of those who answered his altar calls during this first visit to the Nanyang. Obviously heartened by his reception, Sung mounted further revival campaigns with trips that included Vietnam, Siam and Myanmar in 1936 (September to December), 1938-39 (September-March) and 1939-40 (May-January). His meetings were regularly packed with hundreds of people, virtually all overseas Chinese, and thousands came forward to be converted or "born again."

It could certainly be argued that this response was in large measure a result of the issues confronting overseas Chinese at this time, rendering them especially receptive to messages of salvation and redemption. While Chinese communities were affected by the economic impact of the Depression and growing anti-Chinese sentiment among local nationalists, they could not fail to be touched by the political turmoil in China itself. In addition to these

largely economic concerns, a heated debate had developed in the wake of the Confucian revival and Chinese nationalism over what constituted "Chineseness," and the extent to which Chinese Christians should abandon traditional customs (Coppel 2002, 303-7). On another level one could point to the magnet of Sung's reputation as a spiritually-endorsed healer, instances of which receive considerable attention in Sung's own diaries (Sung 2008, 417, 429, 439), as well as in local newspapers. The *Singapore Free Press*, for instance, listed a number of cures that were "only a few of the cases [healed by] Dr. Sung, prophet, preacher, miracle worker and champion of the Methodist faith (*The Singapore Free Press* 1935a, 6). This paper, however, focuses on the way in which the Christian word was presented, arguing that it was uniquely suited to the largely Chinese audiences Sung hoped to reach. His ability to "enact" his message was especially significant because his own mother-tongue was a Hinghua dialect unintelligible to most of his listeners, and very few understood the Mandarin or occasionally English in which he preached. He was therefore dependent on translators to transmit his sermons in Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew and at times Malay, which was used some churches like that in Prinsenlaan (Batavia) where the congregation was largely *peranakan*, or mestizo Chinese (Ong 1935, 695).

While some Dutch missionaries, amazed at the effectiveness of Sung's preaching, compared his campaigns to the revival in Wales (Tow 1985, 225), the most forthright, if somewhat crude, characterization of the theatrical aspects of Sung's evangelism comes from the United Press agency in Singapore. Reporting on January 26, 1937, the leadline in various American newspapers read "Buddhists hit Sawdust Trail[1] under Spell of 'Billy Sunday.'" Describing "the young Chinese evangelist, Dr. John Sung" as a "hot gospeler," the article reported that hundreds of Singapore Buddhists had been converted to Christianity with methods that were "a mixture of Billy Sunday and Aimee S. McPherson." In preaching, it continued, Dr. Sung "is able to imitate any voice in the manner of a Chinese actor and play the part of any character. At any point in the sermon he may break unexpectedly into song" (*Berkeley Free Gazette* 1937, 4; *The Singapore Free Press* 1935b, 6).

Two points are relevant here. The first is the emphasis on music and singing, a significant fact in engaging audience participation. While Sung always saw the sermon as the most important component of his meetings, he also regarded music as sanctified by the Bible, since Paul and Silas sang in jail (Ong 1941, 195). He often mentioned his admiration for John Wesley, who had used music and hymn-singing so effectively (Lyall 2004, 81; Sung 2008, 259), and contemporary accounts convey some sense of how this music was incorporated into Sung's meetings. Prior to his sermon a piano was put place, and chorus sheets were handed out so that those present could practice several times and learn the tunes and words by heart before he began to preach. These simple songs, often composed by Sung himself, used lyrics that could be sung simultaneously in different Chinese dialects. It is worth noting that in Java one of his most popular tunes was not composed in Chinese, but the *peranakan* language of Malay: *Pulanglah, pulanglah/Jangan terlanjar/Tuhan sudah buka tangan/Harap kau pulang* ("Come home, come home! Don't keep roaming far from home! The arms of God are open, longing for your return" (Baarbé 2011, 27; Tow 1985, 224). Perhaps more significant in terms of creating a sense of "Chineseness" was the use not just of the most common (and mutually incomprehensible) migrant languages but of Mandarin "our spoken national language," which encouraged Chinese who had never been to China to think about the unifying changes occurring in the country of their parents and grandparents (Tow 1985, 28).

[1] The American term, "sawdust trail," refers to the temporary buildings or tents used by itinerant ministers for revival meetings.

The music that infused such vitality into Sung's meetings was closely integrated with a selected Bible reading, which would be discussed line by line (for example, Revelations 21, on the New Heaven). But these explanations were far from a lecture, for participation was a key component in Sung's ability to maintain audience attention. Reiterating the comments made by the United Press, an account from Java noted that after every five minutes or so he would lead the congregation in another rendering of "Pulanglah" – "Come home" (Baarbé 2011, 29). The appeal of this chorus is noteworthy because Sung – who remembered his own early experiences as young "wanderer" who had gone "alone across the seas"– recognized the power of "home" in the thinking of overseas Chinese. Incorporating this imagery into his songs, he often opened his sermons with talk of returning to a "home" that was equated with Heaven but which for many migrant Chinese also conjured up memories of an ancestral birthplace (Ireland 2012, 241, 251 fn. 13). It is thus understandable that one of his most popular sermons focused on the parable of the Prodigal Son, and that the images this conveyed often moved his migrant audiences to tears.

The second point made by the United Press report focused on John Sung's acting ability, and the theatrical skills that made American observers think of Billy Sunday and Aimee Mcpherson, while for local listeners ensuring that there was "never a dull moment." Although Sung made extensive notes before he preached, he rarely referred to these when he spoke. Rather than some "dry-as-dust lecture-type sermons based on some abstract truth, Dr. Sung clothed the doctrine he was putting across in vivid, lively figures. . . . He excelled most preaching biographical and allegorical sermons" (Tow 1985, 30). The effective use of comic relief was a key method to keep his listeners attentive. For instance, enacting the behavior associated with "lost sheep," he imitated young dandies, cigarettes dangling from their lips, coquettish girls in their high heels, corpulent businessmen, cinema-goes, respectable churchgoers and religious hypocrites. "The audience," writes his biographer, "rocked with laughter" (Lyall 2004 221). Yet he could easily move to a more serious level, invoking weeping and lamentations as he recounted the story of Christ's death, and reminded those present of the sins for which Calvary had made atonement. "Under Dr. Sung's preaching we . . . followed the whole crucifixion moment by moment, we heard the hammer blows and saw the nails being driven in" (Baarbé 2011, 35). In Saigon he was so carried away by his enactment of "a gospel story" (probably that of Christ's arrest) that he even spat in the face of his interpreter (Lyall 2004 210).[2]

Sung's narrative powers were augmented by his skill as a cartoonist, a "teaching aid" for those who might not understand Mandarin or the dialect translation. In Surabaya in 1939, for example, the missionary Cornelia Baarbé provided an extremely vivid account of his rendering of the parable of the Lost Sheep, describing how Sung used a blackboard to provide illustrations "with a few lines and streaks. At first we saw the Lord with the sinners around him. Then, the grumbling Pharisees. And then came the shepherd with a big hat and staff . . . and finally the little conceited animal that followed his own lead" (Baarbé 2011 29-30). On other occasions blackboard pictures were employed simply to emphasize a point in the sermon. "How he caricatured our spiritual impotence by chalking a big head which was our pride, a big belly our laziness, little twigs of hands and feet our inability to do anything good" (Tow 1985, 30).

Modern preachers are ambivalent about the use of "props," since they can be a distraction and "the risk is high for all but the most disciplined performer" (Childers 1998, 141). Yet in

[2] See Matthew 26:67. "Then they spit in his face and struck him."

this regard Sung was a master. To support what was arguably his most famous sermon, "Open the Coffin," he used a small coffin that was carried by someone picked out from the audience. The stones it contained represented sins and the spiritual death that sin would incur. For every fresh sin committed a stone would be added until the bearer was born down by the weight. But slowly, one by one, the removal of these stones, the "dead works" would open up "the coffin of our hearts." The emotional impact of this much-repeated presentation was invariably intense: "Several hundred people confessed their sins and wept "as though Judgment Day had come." (Lyall 2004 111; Sung 2008, 176).[3] Another example is provided in his enactment of the New Birth, when his "prop" was an old gown on which was written the names of different sins. At the appropriate moment in his sermon he would throw away the old gown "at the Cross" and replace it with a "new robe of righteousness" (Lyall 2004, 181). To demonstrate the same transformation of those "born again," he might take a flashlight without batteries which was rendered unworkable by being stuffed with pieces of paper, each labeled with a sin. The "sins" would then be removed and batteries inserted so that the flashlight would shine. A coal stove, which Sung would fan to send sparks (the impact of the Holy Spirit) flying in all directions, relighting the dead coals and thus bringing lost souls back to life (Baarbé 2011 50).

There can be no doubt that John Sung's four trips to Southeast Asia made a significant impression on overseas Chinese, especially in Singapore, British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. Certainly, a good number of "conversions" were probably short-lived, since a significant proportion of non-Chinese attendees would have been attracted by Sung's reputation as a healer, or even by simple curiosity. Yet long after he had left his transcribed sermons and songbooks continued to circulate (providing, in a sense, a "script" for lay preachers), while the memory of this charismatic celebrity was also retained through the sale of photographs (Ireland 2012, 239, 245). For numerous individuals the mere possession of Sung's sermons was an acceptable substitute when the oral delivery had been poorly understood, and the texts provided preaching material for the Evangelical Bands he created, many of which even survived the trauma of the war years (Lyall 2004 202, 208, 24; Sung 2008, 417). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the written word could ever convey the emotional atmosphere and charismatic presence that prevailed during his evangelistic meetings. This difference between the written and spoken word, especially in relation to John Sung's preaching, is nicely conveyed in a comment by an American pastor, R.T. Kendall. He had talked to a man who had been converted by Sung and still remembered the extraordinary impact of these sermons, but for Kendall the written versions of Sunga's sermons "were utterly devoid of substantial contact" (Kendall 1998, 50). In a similar vein, the Frenchman who translated Sung's sermons into Vietnamese commented that they were "overly simplistic" (Sung 2008, 416). Yet one cannot dispute the effectiveness of his oral deliveries. In the words of the *Singapore Free Press*, "Dr. Sung is a preacher of rare power. He has been described as a prophet of God, a John the Baptist calling his people to repentance, an oriental Savonarola converting a whole city by his preaching against the sin of society and as a Chinese John Wesley translating the Gospel into terms the Chinese people can understand" (*The Singapore Free Press* 1935b, 6).

In comparing the spoken and written word historians face a major problem, because in the absence of modern technology there is no way that we can invoke the intensity of Sung's oral deliveries, or recapture the kind of reactions they aroused. In Southeast Asian studies we also lack useful models, since we have hardly begun to consider the history of emotions, even though they are a driving force in shaping public responses on a range of issues. Those

[3] The imminence of Judgment Day was a standard trope in revival meetings.

who (like myself) approach Sung through sometimes questionable translations (Poon 2010, xxiii) face further obstacles, since a close linguistic analysis of the original published sermons and diaries would be extremely helpful in determining the Chinese words Sung used to convey the specifics of evangelistic teaching. Lacking such material, a report in the *Singapore Free Press* captures something of the extraordinary response that his visits generated.

> *The farewell given on Saturday and on Friday night (25th-26th October 1935) to Dr. John Sung, one of China's greatest evangelists, by thousands of Chinese Christians was one of the most extraordinary ever seen in Singapore. When Dr. Sung boarded the* Corfu *on Saturday to return home about 700 Chinese were weeping on the wharf and Chinese of all ages marched through the streets carrying banners of the Cross. Dr. Sung preached his farewell sermon to Singapore's Chinatown. . . a vast concourse listened in the open air to Dr. Sung's oratory, which came to them through loudspeakers. Inside the building a congregation of some 1,300 people filled every seat* (*The Singapore Free Press* 1935b, 6).

Contrasting Responses in Southeast Asia

Accolades like those accorded John Sung in Singapore attest to his undeniable influence. However, they also raise questions about the extent to which the transportation of "words" into visual and aural performances enabled Chinese Christians in Southeast Asia to establish greater independence and to detach themselves from Western missionary control (Lau 2008, 146-7). A more general overview of Southeast Asia suggests that at times Chinese Christians were ambivalent about Sung's theology and general style of evangelism, notably in areas where Western missionaries were especially influential. Sung was obviously disappointed by his reception in the Philippines, dominated by Roman Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism, as well as that in Hanoi, where the response to his campaign was "lukewarm" (Sung 2008, 303, 322). The opposition he encountered in Siam was particularly galling because between 1938 and 1939 he "traversed the entire kingdom", from north to south. Initially one congregation even passed a resolution forbidding him to preach, and his visit was said to create "serious controversy" among Thai Christians. Indeed, references to the "considerable tension" produced by his "Billy Sunday" approach, accepted by local Chinese but criticized by foreign missionaries and the Thais, point to underlying divisions in the Thai church. One leading missionary even described Sung's followers as "unbalanced Christians" and compared his methods to those of the devil, calling for their complete eradication. Although his visit had been sponsored by an influential Western-educated Chinese-Thai pastor, Sung came to the conclusion that "churches [in Siam] were controlled by foreigners and the Chinese were neither self-sufficient nor self-reliant" (Sung 2008, 427-8, 441-4; Tow 1985, 174-5, 218). Seung Ho Son's study of Sung's Siamese campaigns concludes that acrimonious exchanges and missionary resistance cast a disturbing light on the gap between the ways local Christians (notably those of Chinese descent) and Western missionaries practiced their shared faith. One should add, however, that Sung's own attitudes would not have helped the situation. The priorities of his mission were for him paramount, and he insisted on preaching even on the King's birthday, which in Siam was not merely a national celebration, but a demonstration of respect for the monarch (Seung 2003, 46, 176-80; Swanson 2003). Predictably, Sung's impact in Siam was always greatest among the Chinese community. Despite reports of miraculous healing and hundreds of converts, Thai Christians, like their American Presbyterian teachers, were often discomfited by an unconventional preaching style that seemed out of place in a religious setting. Was it appropriate, for instance, for a minister to

personally chase out an individual who did not appear to be listening to the sermon? (Lyall 204, 218-19; Seung 2003, 157).

Even in Singapore, where Sung attained iconic status, Christian publications suggest a cleavage between local Chinese-dialect churches and those where Western influence was more pronounced. The *Malaysia Message*, the English-language journal of the Methodist Church, was initially supportive, but from 1936 the editorial board was obviously concerned about the emotionalism and faith healing the characterized Sung's campaigns, as well as the use of meetings to raise money. By contrast, its Chinese counterpart *Nanzhong* maintained enthusiastic coverage and Sung's unique style of evangelism was never questioned (Poon 2010, xxi). The situation was similar in the Netherlands Indies and British Malaya, where we see only isolated instances of the animosity Sung encountered in Siam and China, and of claims that his campaigns led to discord. The positive reception he received in these Muslim majority countries may be attributed to the fact that Western missionaries were typically more concerned with indigenous Christian congregations and the leadership of the Chinese churches had largely devolved into the hands of Chinese themselves (Aritonang and Steenbrink 2008, 905, 911). By the mid 1930s, for example, Chinese Christians in Singapore and Malaya were already organizing their own conferences to avoid the problem of translation and to accommodate participants whose English was limited (Lau 2008, 149-50). Chinese churches, like Singapore's Telok Ayer Chinese Methodist Church, provided Sung with open access, and independent invitations came from the "Chinese Churches of Singapore," or in Batavia, from a specially established Chinese committee (The *Straits Times* 1935, 13; *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1938). In Sarawak Chinese church leaders overrode objections from the Resident British Missionary, who did not feel an evangelist rally was necessary, and invited Sung to make a ten-day visit. They were completely vindicated, for the effects of the revival were long-lasting. Above all, Sung was remembered because of the novelty and effectiveness of his preaching: "When he described the parable of the prodigal son, he touched the hearts of the audience and moved them to feel regret and sadness. . . . When he related the crucifixion of Jesus and the blood shed, it aroused the audience to feel deep sympathy with Jesus' afflictions" (Yao 2007).

While Sung was generally welcomed by Chinese Christians, contemporary records from Singapore, British Malaya and the Netherlands Indies also suggest that colonial authorities did not see him as a threat, although his visa to Batavia was delayed for six months. Sung was apparently more circumspect in his comments about Western influence than was the case in China, and press reports were universally positive. The *Straits Times* and the *Singapore Free Press*, for instance, described him as "one of China greatest evangelists", a "Chinese John Wesley" and photographs showed the crowds of Chinese who gave him a "tumultuous send-off" (*Singapore Free Press*, 1935b, 6; *The Straits Times* 1935, 13; *The Straits Times* 1936, 12). Dutch-language newspapers similarly recorded that his meetings were "a great success", while journalists remarked on the "amazing number" of people who flocked to hear him. It is also possible that co-operation between Chinese congregations and their European or European-oriented counterparts was strengthened by need to demonstrate unity against a perceived Muslim advance. For instance, the Chinese church on Batavia's Prinsenlaan was found to be too small to accommodate the expected crowds, and services were therefore moved to the much larger Portuguese church, where services were normally conducted in Malay (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 1939; *Het Nieuws* 1939; Hoon 2013, 166). In Ambon a Protestant Dominee provided the necessary funds to build a large *atap* tabernacle for Sung's services, as well as lending a piano, blackboard and chairs (Anon 1940).

In the Netherlands East Indies one could also argue that the growing presence of the

Pentecostal church (*Pinkster Gemeente*), established in the 1920s by Dutch and Americans, had paved the way for the reception of Sung's altar calls and his faith healing, prayer sessions and emotional preaching. Indeed, he first came to Java at the invitation of the Pentecostal community of Surabaya and in Ambon (eastern Indonesia) a Pentecostal missionary couple from America said they had prayed for about six months for God to send "Dr. John Sung, the noted Chinese evangelist" (Anon., 1940). But Ambon was one of the strongholds of Dutch Reformed Calvinism, and church worship followed a strict format that was not sympathetic to liturgical deviation. Sung's arrival did not make things easier, and he himself said that in comparison with other areas of the Indies, Ambon presented the most difficulties. One pastor warned that he would forbid his members from attending revival meetings if the sermons were objectionable, and Sung even received threatening letters. In this context, the value of the Pentecostal connection soon became evident. It was the Pentecostal missionaries who advised against accepting the offer of the largest Protestant church in Ambon as a venue, noting that this "vast building" would be a deterrent to "the poor and lowly, especially China-born Chinese, who would not feel free to enter." Yet even in an unsympathetic environment Sung never lost his ability to exploit the dramatic moment to full effect. Three days after his arrival in Ambon, exasperated by what he saw as spiritual indifference, in the middle of his evening service he suddenly sat down and exploded: "Your hearts are so hard! You're not receiving my message at all!" The impact of his ultimatum – either his audience would become more receptive, or he would leave for Makassar – was immediate, and in the words of one observer, "It was as though that great audience came to life there and then." A week later, in his last meeting, the congregation had swelled to around four thousand people (Anon, 1940).

Conclusion

Between 1935 and 1939 John Sung spent altogether almost two years campaigning in Southeast Asia, for the most part in Netherlands Indies, British Malaya and Singapore. Although this essay has given particular attention to Chinese Christians, it is important to stress that Sung's appeal reached beyond the Chinese community. While the call for "all Java for Jesus!" was hardly fulfilled (Ong 1941, 16-7), extant photographs show that non-Chinese Christians and Eurasians (who often felt marginalized in mainstream churches) also flocked to hear Sung preach. Significantly, a number of Europeans were similarly attracted, like Cornelia Baarbé, who worked among the Chinese in Java and who became an admirer despite her initial skepticism (Baarbé 2011). In Rangoon, too, "many Indians stood outside the hall in which his services were held, and many people shed tears when we started singing the song *Come Home"* (Sung 2008 30). This widespread appeal generated a demand for his sermons as published collections, and in Singapore Sung's personal testimony was translated into English as early as 1936.

The historical context is also central to any assessment of Sung's lasting influence. In studies of Chinese Christianity he is presented as simply one of a several charismatic preachers who emerged in the turbulent years of the early twentieth century. In Southeast Asia, however, he stands alone, for he was the only one to directly engage the overseas Chinese communities at a time when many felt beleaguered by local nationalism, immigration restrictions and racial discrimination. In this context Sung's explicit and unapologetic self-identification as a Chinese conveyed a powerful message of confidence – he dressed as a Chinese, his publications were in Chinese and he spoke essentially to Chinese interests and from a Chinese perspective. Asked his opinion about his contemporary Gandhi, for instance, his response was forthright: "China does not need the

teaching of Gandhi. The teaching of Confucius is far better." Yet he was simultaneously an avowed Christian in a period when ethnic Chinese churches were seeking to assert an independent Christian identity. Sung was instrumental in demonstrating that Chinese Christians could take charge of their own destinies and worship in their own way – in his case, through the participatory emotion induced by performance, music and the enactment of biblical teachings. It is hardly surprising that an early biographer, Leslie Lyall, describes Sung not as a cross-cultural messenger, but as a specifically Chinese evangelist, who will be honored "wherever Chinese Christians are to be found" (Lyall 2004 xliv, 87, 180). But in furthering this association, it can be argued that Sung's revival campaigns helped to highlight the ethnic divisions that reinforced perceptions of Chinese as a separate grouping. Furthermore, although Sung certainly laid the ground for the spread of Christianity among overseas Chinese, the Christianization process served to underline the growing class divide between Christian and non-Christian Chinese. In the evolving history of ethnic relations in Southeast Asia the evangelism of John Sung thus deserves particular attention because religious difference has proved to be so critical in determining the degree to which co-existence can truly operate.

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