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Item Type	Article
Authors	Sim, Joshua Dao Wei
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College, Shatin, Hong Kong
Rights	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College, Shatin, Hong Kong
Download date	2026-07-13 23:14:42
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4047969

A Chinese Protestant Female Model
in Southeast Asia:
The “Confucianizing” of
Leona Jingling Wu in 1970s Singapore

JOSHUA DAO-WEI SIM

Abstract

This study draws on recent scholarship about Chinese Christian textual traditions to analyze the posthumous biographies of Leona Jingling Wu (1897–1974), the prominent leader of John Sung’s evangelistic bands in Singapore and founder of the island’s first Chinese Protestant higher education institute, Chin Lien Bible Seminary. The essay argues that these biographies “Confucianized” Wu by re-casting her as a Chinese-Christian female spiritual model. First, a survey of literary productions from the pre-1970s demonstrates that Wu was initially portrayed as an evangelical rather than a female Confucian model. Second, the process of “Confucianizing” Wu only becomes apparent in her biographies written in the 1970s. Three strategies were employed to highlight Wu’s Confucian attributes—the re-telling of her Chinese-Christian

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The draft of this paper was presented at “The 9th International Young Scholars’ Symposium,” The Chinese University of Hong Kong, December 5–9, 2018. The author would like to express his sincere gratitude to Wang Jinping for her valuable guidance and suggestions for this paper. He also thanks David A. Palmer for his criticisms and insights which have enriched the study.

genealogy, an emphasis on her filial piety before she moved to Singapore, and the re-imagination of her as a spiritual mother. In all, her biographers re-casted her as a Chinese and Christian who successfully melded the key values of both traditions.

Chinese Christian women who were memorialized in obituaries published in the *China Church Year Book* (中華基督教會年鑑 *Zhonghua Jidujiaohui Nianjian*) were deemed to have lived up to the ideals of virtuous women and exemplary Christians in late Qing and early Republican China. The “style and format” of these obituaries generally followed the traditional model of biographical writings (傳 *zhuan*) that started in the Han Dynasty.¹ Peter Chen-main Wang, one of the first scholars to examine these obituaries, explains that these writings typically stressed the distinguished family backgrounds, educational training, and virtues of the women in their premarital and married lives. What set these obituaries apart was the Christian faith that these women adopted; for instance, biographers highlighted the peacefulness displayed by these women when they faced death because, to them, it “meant...the reunion with God” in heaven. Wang concludes that this behavior was rather “unusual in Chinese culture” and biographers took pains to stress “this point.”² Beyond Wang’s work, only a small number of scholars have examined Christian biographies as a primary research topic. Some of them have sought to highlight examples of Catholic biographies, the most noteworthy being studies that have scrutinized Jesuit missionary Philippe Couplet’s European-language biographical accounts of Candida Xu, granddaughter of Xu Guangqi 徐光啓, prominent Ming dynasty Chinese Catholic scholar. A recent study has also examined a Jesuit attempt to construct an “exemplary biography” of Saint Benedict (father of Western monasticism) in late Ming.³ Therefore this study seeks to add to this small body of litera-

¹ Peter Chen-main Wang, “Models of Female Christians in Early Twentieth-Century China: A Historiographical Study,” in *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility*, ed. Jessie G. Lutz (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2010), 166–67 and 177–78.

² *Ibid.*, 166–77.

³ Gail King, “Couplet’s Biography of Madame Candida Xu (1607–1680),” *Sino-Western Cultural Relations Journal* 18 (1996): 41–56 and “Candida Xu and the Growth of Christianity in China in the Seventeenth Century,” *Monumenta Serica* 46 (1998): 49–66; Claudia von Collani, “Lady Candida Xu: A Widow between Chinese and Christian Ideals,” in *Pioneer Chinese Christian Women*, 224–45, and Matteo Nicolini-Zani, “The First ‘Life of Saint Benedict’ in Chinese: An Exemplary

ture by analyzing the biographical accounts of an important Southeast Asian Chinese Protestant female leader.

As mentioned, these Protestant obituaries largely conformed to the traditional *zhuan* genre where the concern of the biographers was about “moulding the evidence from the past into narratives that would both inspire and instruct.”⁴ What is interesting, however, is that the Protestants continued to choose this format of writing to memorialize significant women and men in their major publications, despite the opening up of new biographical writing approaches during early twentieth-century China. Within the intellectual sphere at least, some approaches that came to prominence were the detailed and critical Western biographical writing style that was advocated by intellectuals such as Liang Qichao 梁啟超, and “self-narrations” which “favored social and political engagement in action” as a major theme.⁵ These new directions in writing arose partly because concerns about China’s weakness, status, and future in the modern world came to occupy the minds of the educated class. Nevertheless, as Marjorie Dryburgh and Sarah Dauncey highlight, *zhuan*—particularly “exemplary lives” literature—was still employed as narratives that could “inspire the young.”⁶ Thus, despite the array of biographical formats that were available, the *zhuan* genre continued to exist as a widely-respected writing style. This thereby gave the Protestant community space to develop their *zhuan* tradition to construct exemplary individual life narratives that could serve as spiritual models for Protestant women and men. In a way, this fit into pre-existing historical patterns of the popular religious usage of *zhuan* which arose since the third century AD, demonstrating the genre’s continued acceptability for projecting ideal models of religiosity among Chinese communities.

This same Protestant *zhuan* tradition moved beyond the bounds of China when the Chinese emigrated overseas; obituaries exalting the Confucian virtues and Christian loyalty of men and women were reproduced in the various Chinese Protestant communities scattered

Biography Contained in Alfonso Vagnone’s *Shengren Xingshi* (1629),” *Monumenta Serica: Journal of Oriental Studies* 64, no. 2 (2016): 361–88.

⁴ Brian Moloughney, “From Biographical History to Historical Biography: A Transformation in Chinese Historical Writing,” *East Asian History*, no. 4 (1992): 12.

⁵ Ibid., 16–20 and Marjorie Dryburgh and Sarah Dauncey, “Chinese Life Writing: Themes and Variations,” in *Writing Lives in China, 1600–2010: Histories of the Elusive Self*, ed. Marjorie Dryburgh and Sarah Dauncey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 39.

⁶ Dryburgh and Dauncey, “Chinese Life Writing,” 39–40.

across Southeast Asia. These overseas Chinese Protestants were keen recipients, followers, and producers of the tradition. The Presbyterians in particular led the way in their contribution to the development of the *zhuan* genre amongst the Southeast Asian churches. The 90th- and 100th-anniversary commemoration volumes of the Presbyterian Church in Singapore and Malaysia published in 1971 and 1981 are a case in point. The key Chinese pastoral executives who spearheaded the production of these volumes compiled numerous obituaries of important Presbyterian male and female leaders, as well as missionaries.⁷ Two important Southeast Asian Chinese Protestant periodicals, the Methodist *Southern Bell* (南鐘 *Nanzhong*) and the fundamentalist *Malaysia Christian* (南洋基督徒 *Nanyang Jidutu*) were also notable contributors to the *zhuan* tradition since the 1930s and 1950s respectively. Both publications specialized in memorializing key male and female leaders who contributed to the development of their local institutions across the region.⁸ Together with the Presbyterians, these organizations produced a cross-denominational body of *zhuan* literature for the Southeast Asian Chinese Protestants, demonstrating how the genre continued to be a popular format for remembering and promoting local models of faith for their readership. Many of these sources remain unstudied due to the lack of attention on Southeast Asia by Chinese Christian scholarship. Significantly, obituaries/biographies that were written about Leona Jingling Wu (吳靜聆, 1897–1974) during 1970s Singapore followed the contours of this *zhuan* tradition. Wu is considered as one of Singapore's most significant female Chinese Christian leaders in the twentieth century. This study thus seeks to build on Wang's historiographical work to provide an account of how the *zhuan* tradition was appropriated by the Singapore Chinese Protestant community to memorialize the life of Wu.

Before arriving in British Malaya in 1934, Wu worked for the English Presbyterian Mission as a teacher and headmistress for Amoy Girls' School in Gulangyu Island, Xiamen, for twenty years. Subse-

⁷ See for example *The Presbyterian Church in Singapore and Malaysia: 90th Anniversary of the Church and 70th Anniversary of the Synod* (Singapore, 1970), 121 and 135, and *The Presbyterian Church in Singapore: 1881–1981, 100th Anniversary Commemoration Volume* (Singapore: Presbyterian Church, 1981), 95–135.

⁸ See for instance biographies in *Nanzhong*, June 1938, 21; April 1955, 26; December 1956, 28; August 1957, 29; and October 1965, 30–31. In *Nanyang Jidutu*, see July 1963, 2; May 1964, 1–3; and Quek Kiok-chiang, *My Thanksgiving Testimonies* (Singapore: Far Eastern Beacon Monthly, 2009), 265–301, for re-publications of *zhuan* from *Nanyang Jidutu*.

quently, she became a pioneering Chinese female Protestant leader: She was the founding principal of the first independent Chinese Protestant higher education institute in Singapore established in 1937—Chin Lien Bible Seminary (金鏈靈修神學院 Jinlian Lingxiu Shenxueyuan). The seminary has trained many full-time Christian workers from Singapore, Malaysia, and China, a large proportion of whom were female. She was also the long-time President of the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League (新加坡基督徒佈道團 Xinjiapo Jidutu Budaotuan), an independent Christian organization which was started by the famous Chinese revivalist John Sung (宋尚節 Song Shangjie, 1901–1944) in 1935 to perpetuate the effects of his revival meetings through regular, group-based evangelism.⁹ As a result of her contributions, Wu was recognized as a leading female figure by the Singapore Chinese Protestant leadership during her lifetime. Due to her stature, one can find at least 18 biographical accounts written about her in the 1970s after her death. Most of these writings were produced by her family members, close co-workers, and students, and published in the 40th-anniversary magazines of the seminary and League, as well as the *Nanyang Jidutu* which served as the regular media outlet for both organizations. It must be acknowledged that it was anomalous for a female leader to receive multiple memorialization considering that Chinese Christian women of that period were still being subjected to what Wai-ching Angela Wong calls the “double legitimization” of the Chinese and Christian patriarchies—that is, “the confinement of women in the Chinese-Christian patriarchal family.”¹⁰

This study examines the biographical writings of Leona Wu that were produced by the said institutions in 1970s Singapore through what I call a “textual-historical approach.” This approach unpacks the strategic elements of particular religious *zhuan* writings by historicizing them within the context of relevant texts which were produced before the construction of the *zhuan* texts.¹¹ Thus, articles

⁹ See Joshua Dao-wei Sim, “Chinese Evangelistic Bands in Nanyang: Leona Wu and the Implementation of the John Sung-Inspired Evangelistic Band Model in Pre-War Singapore,” *Fides et Historia* 50, no. 2 (2018): 36–65. Also see Daryl R. Ireland, “Becoming Modern Women: Creating a New Female Identity through John Sung’s Evangelistic Teams,” *Studies in World Christianity* 18, no. 3 (2012): 237–53.

¹⁰ Wai-ching Angela Wong, “Negotiating Between Two Patriarchies: Chinese Christian Women in Postcolonial Hong Kong,” in *Gendering Chinese Religion: Subject, Identity, and Body*, ed. Jin Jinhua, Kang Xiaofei, and Yao Ping (New York: The State University of New York Press, 2014), 158–59.

¹¹ This approach is like what Chloë Starr has proposed in her seminal study on Chinese theology in 2016. The difference is that the objectives of my approach are historical

about Wu or by herself before her death—or what can be called the early literary productions—are analyzed to provide a chronological comparison with the later biographical writings which were published after she passed on. I argue that these biographies “Confucianized” Wu by re-casting her as a virtuous Chinese-Christian woman model. By “Confucianized,” I mean that her biographers undertook a retrospective evaluative process to interpret her life and faith through a gendered, Confucian lens resulting in the production of writings which stressed how she met the ideals of Confucian womanhood (see below) through her behavior and practices. This is apparent in two ways. First, a survey of the early literary productions demonstrates that Wu was not initially portrayed as a female Confucian model. Instead, she was seen as a female Protestant leader who was filled with evangelical zeal and ambition. Christian spirituality, identity, and practices were, overwhelmingly, the focal points of these writings. Second, the process of “Confucianizing” Wu only becomes apparent in her biographies. The writers employed three strategies to highlight Wu’s Confucian attributes, that is, the re-telling of her Chinese-Christian genealogy, an emphasis on her filial piety before she moved to Singapore, and the re-imagination of her as a spiritual mother. Finally, I reflect on the significance of Wu’s biographical “Confucianization” in two ways. The first question relates to her biographers’ attempts to prove the “Chinese-ness” of her Christianity. The second question asks about the value of her biographies within the broader context of modern Chinese theological writings.

THE EARLY LITERARY PRODUCTIONS

Two types of literary productions are briefly examined in this section: Leona Wu’s writings and some early biographical passages written about her role as leader of the two institutions. It should be emphasized that most of these early writings bore three important marks of evangelical Christianity—a strong focus on evangelism, biblicism or treating the Christian Scriptures as the highest authority in all matters in life, and an emphasis that the center of the Christian faith lies in the

and built upon the categories of Wang’s work, while Starr’s objectives are primarily theological. More will be discussed about Starr’s study at the end of this essay.

atonement work of Jesus Christ on the cross and his subsequent bodily resurrection.¹²

In terms of evangelistic work, Wu's chief focus in her writings lay in her religious conviction that the gospel should be proclaimed throughout Southeast Asia. This also meant that she was single-minded about her task at hand and rarely brought up stories on the first 37 years of her life in China. As we shall see in the next section, these stories were recovered by her biographers to create a Confucianized image of her. Before that, any literary work by Wu or about her would have given the reader a strong impression that she was thoroughly evangelical in thought, identity and practice. Put differently, Wu's religious self-understanding and portrayals of her work seemed to defy conventional cultural norms and roles which were still being ascribed to women, making her look "un-Confucian" in many respects.¹³

One important example can be seen in her foreword for the fifth edition of the *Singapore Christian Evangelistic Band Magazine* (1946).¹⁴ In this article, Wu drew on the earliest spatial mapping of world regions targeted for evangelism that was found in the Bible and appropriated it for her purposes. In the original mapping, four areas—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and "to the ends of the earth"—were designated as places in which the gospel would be proclaimed. Jerusalem, the Holy City, was taken as the starting point for evangelization before the early church believers fanned out progressively across Judea, Samaria, and eventually to Europe and Asia Minor. Wu utilized this same mapping scheme on Southeast Asia by equating the first three areas with specific places in the region; Jerusalem was re-imagined as Singapore, Judea as Malaya, and Samaria as the Malay Archipelago (南洋群島 *Nanyang Qundao*).¹⁵ Her

¹² David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 1–19 and *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), chap. 1.

¹³ I would like to thank David A. Palmer for his insight on this matter.

¹⁴ The original name of the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League was Singapore Christian Evangelistic Band. The word "Band" was replaced by "League" by the time the 1951 anniversary magazine of the League was printed.

¹⁵ Leona Jingling Wu 吳靜聆, "Xuyan" 序言 [Foreword], in *Singapore Christian Evangelistic Band Magazine: Fifth Edition*, ed. Paul Hang (Singapore: Xingzhou zhongying gongsi, 1946), 2. See Acts 1:8 and the whole book of Acts for the historical pattern of the early church's movement out of Jerusalem. See also Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand

re-imagination of Southeast Asia in biblical proportions is revealing of her optimism that the region could be successfully evangelized after World War II if Christians followed closely after the pattern set out in the Bible.

This desire to evangelize the communities in Southeast Asia can also be detected through the strong, urgent language that is scattered throughout all her writings. In the same 1946 article that we have examined, Wu spelled this out in a pressing manner,

How many households in Singapore [and] lands (the whole of Malaya and the Malay Archipelago) have not yet heard the gospel...the work needed in other lands requires us to go and open up [new outreach opportunities].¹⁶

In another article written in 1951, although Wu lamented the falling number of Evangelistic League members after the war, she continued to express optimism that the smaller numbers could accomplish effective evangelism by becoming “fresh, combat-worthy troops” (生力軍 *shenglijun*) and “suicide squads” (敢死隊 *gansidui*) who could handle “Satan” to save souls.¹⁷ By resorting to the use of martial imagery and spiritual warfare with God’s ultimate enemy, Wu tried to soften the blow of the fall in physical numbers by reminding readers that efficacious evangelism did not depend on large numbers of people but on the extent of the sacrifice of those who are evangelizing. Even when the League had shrunk to discouraging proportions in 1969, Wu praised its remaining members for “persevering in [their] original aspirations [for evangelism]” (堅持初志 *jianchi chuzhi*) and their establishment of multiple mission posts around the rural areas of Singapore and Malaysia.¹⁸

Rapids, MI: Baker Books; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 23–31 for a brief overview of the spread of the early church.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷ Leona Jingling Wu 吳靜聆, “Budaotuan shiwu nianlai gongzuo gaikuang” 佈道團十五年來工作概況 [A General View of the Ministries During the Last 15 Years in the Evangelistic League], in *The Fifteenth Anniversary Magazine of the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League*, ed. Paul Hang (Singapore: Xingzhou nanyang yingwu gongsi, 1951), 231–34.

¹⁸ Leona Jingling Wu 吳靜聆, “Jinlian lingxiu shenxueyuan jianjie ji zaixiao tongxue shixi gongzuo baogao” 金鍵領袖神學院簡介及在校同學實習工作報告 [Brief Introduction to Chin Lien Bible Seminary and Report of Current Students on Practicum], *Nanyang Jidutu* (October 1969): 3.

Perhaps, the thoroughly evangelical persona of Leona Wu can be summarized by this rather queer and imaginative recollection by her in 1951 which exposed the intensity and influence of her religious convictions upon her life. Whilst on a train to Kuala Lumpur in 1936, Wu recalled that she saw a bright light reflection from the train tracks that formed into the shape of a radiant cross. She immediately broke down “uncontrollably” with “thanksgiving,” singing, “The cross leads me home...I have a big hope/ [To] joyously hasten [to] the heavenly home/ The cross leads me home.” Commenting on her recollection, Wu concluded that since God had used the cross to guide the League members to preach the “gospel of the cross,” they should “dig deep” and “rouse themselves” for the work of evangelism.¹⁹ More broadly, these examples demonstrate the dominance of evangelical thought in her discourse and writings, particularly as seen through her belief in the effectiveness of a biblical model of evangelism.

Secondly, earlier biographical accounts of Wu focused on placing her leadership of the two organizations squarely in the line of succession of John Sung’s work. The main person who advocated this historical interpretation was Timothy Tow (杜祥輝 Du Xianghui, 1920–2009), a founding pastor of the Singapore Bible-Presbyterian movement in 1955 who was invited by Wu to be a faculty member at post-war Chin Lien in 1950. Tow’s biographical writings came at the backdrop of some important changes to the Singapore Protestant scene. Internally, enrolment numbers to the seminary were increasing and the leaders had embarked on a project to build a female hostel extension and the John Sung Memorial Hall after the Japanese Occupation ended. Externally, Tow and his close compatriot Quek Kio-chiang (郭克昌 Guo Kecheng, 1916–2015) led a movement to break away from the Presbyterian Church of Malaya in the 1950s because of the official ties that the denomination held with the Malayan Christian Council—an inter-denominational body which they believed to be heretical.²⁰ This schism resulted in the establishment of the Bible-Presbyterian Church and a fundamentalist alliance with which the League and seminary became closely associated. Though small, the pugnacity of the fundamentalist alliance was seen as a “fairly serious” destabilizing force by

¹⁹ Wu, “Budaotuan shiwu nianlai,” 231–34.

²⁰ Joshua Dao-wei Sim, “Captivating God’s Heart: A History of Independent Christianity, Fundamentalism and Gender in Chin Lien Bible Seminary and the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League, 1935–1997” (master’s thesis, National University of Singapore, 2015), 62–75 and Timothy Tow, *The Singapore B-P Church Story* (Singapore: Life Book Centre, 1995).

the mainstream church leaders who headed the Council from the 1950s to the 1970s.²¹ Accordingly, the powerful memory of John Sung as a revivalist who stood for the orthodox gospel in the pre-war period became a convenient image for Tow to appropriate in order to strengthen the reputation of the new fundamentalist alliance, as well as to legitimize Wu and the seminary as the rightful heirs of Sung's legacy.²²

An article written in 1961 was Tow's first attempt to sketch this link. In the article, he recalled how Wu was inspired to open the seminary after internalizing Sung's teachings as she served as his Hokkien translator when he itinerated around Southeast Asia from 1935 to 1939. Tow went on to explain that the seminary's completed dormitory extension and John Sung Memorial Hall in 1957 were financed by many Christian believers and churches who were revitalized by Sung during the 1930s. Thus, given the intimate historical ties that the seminary shared with Sung through Wu and their financial supporters, they deserved to inherit Sung's mantle and "continue his work."²³ Tow then drew on this logic to memorialize Wu as Sung's direct "successor" in Southeast Asia in two articles that he wrote in 1972 and 1974. Essentially, Tow argued that Wu deserved this title as she "watered" and "nurtured"²⁴ the Christian believers and institutions that Sung left behind through her leadership of the League and teaching work at Chin Lien.²⁵

In the end, these early literary works gave little indication that a coming transformation of Wu into a Confucianized Chinese-Christian

²¹ John Fleming, "Some Notes on the History and Development of the Malayan Christian Council," Papers of John Robb Fleming, CSNWW23 Folder 4/1: SE Asia: South-East Asia: Reports, Papers and Articles, Centre for the Study of World Christianity, University of Edinburgh, in Michael Nai-chiu Poon (潘乃昭 Pan Naizhao), *Song Shangjie yu nianshiji Xinjiapo Huaren Jidujiao de lingcheng* 宋尚節與廿世紀新加坡華人基督教的靈程 [John Sung and the Spiritual Journey of 20th Century Singapore Chinese Christianity] (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2015), 121–23.

²² See Michael Nai-chiu Poon, "Interpreting John Sung's Legacy in Southeast Asia," *Trinity Theological Journal* 21 (2013): 140–45.

²³ Timothy Tow (杜祥輝 Du Xianghui), "Ji Song Shangjie boshi zhihou" 繼宋尚節博士之後 [After Succeeding Dr. John Sung], in *Singapore Christian Evangelistic League Silver Jubilee Commemorative Magazine*, ed. Tay Swee-lan (Singapore: Hong Boon Printing, 1961), 49–50.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Timothy Tow, "Leona Wu 'My Handmaiden,'" in *Chin Lien Bible Seminary 35th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine*, ed. Quek Kiok-chiang and Tay Swee-lan (Singapore: Tiger Press, 1972), 2–3 and "Zhuinian 'Zhushinu' Wu Jingling" 追念「主使女」吳靜聆 [Remembering "God's Handmaiden" Leona Wu], *Nanyang Jidutu* (October 1974): 2.

model was to take place in the 1970s. Her strong identification with the faith and evangelical beliefs, as well as Tow's historical constructions to commemorate her and the institutions she led as legitimate successors of John Sung, were the mainstream understandings of Leona Wu.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL "CONFUCIANIZING" OF LEONA WU IN THE 1970S

Why then did Wu's family members, close associates, and students decide to re-write her history along the lines of the biographical tradition during the 1970s? While each writer stressed their agenda for doing so, their writings came within the purview of the 40th-anniversary magazines for the League and seminary, which were published in 1975 and 1977 respectively. High on the agenda of the two magazines was the motif of remembering the important figures who influenced the destinies of the two organizations. Quek Kiok-chiang, one of the editors for the 1975 magazine, emphasized the theme of remembrance by refining Tow's earlier thesis of Wu as the successor of Sung. Drawing on the statement by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:8—"He who plants and he who waters are one"—Quek went on to describe John Sung as the "planter" (栽種人 *zaizhongren*) and Wu as the "waterer" (澆灌人 *jiaoguanren*). He added that Wu was "worthy of our reminiscing and cherishing" because of her faithful service to God.²⁶ These statements suggest that the new leadership of both institutions thought that memorializing Wu and other influential figures as role models could potentially be the means to guide the future steps of the institutions' developmental paths. The thinking behind this agenda can be further seen in the two themes of the 1977 magazine's foreword which was written by Ng Phek-loan (黃碧鑾 Huang Biluan, 1907–2003), Wu's closest associate and right-hand woman for many years. The two themes were: "cherishing the

²⁶ Quek Kiok-chiang (郭克昌 Guo Kecheng), "Fakanci" 發刊詞 [Foreword], in *Singapore Christian Evangelistic League 40th Anniversary Souvenir Magazine*, ed. Quek Kiok-chiang and Tay Swee-lan (Singapore: Tiger Press, 1975), 1.

memories of the past, when drinking water, think of its source” and “looking to the future, with hope stored in the heart.”²⁷

A second reason was fundraising. Chin Lien was a seminary that was largely dependent on external fundraising to finance its operations. Unlike other theological colleges, Chin Lien did not receive any stable source of funds provided by supporting denominational organizations. As the seminary had plans for further expansion in the 1970s, memorializing Wu in ways that were worthy of remembrance served as publicity to attain pecuniary assistance from various supporters and individuals.²⁸ Consequently, these new biographical productions diverged from the earlier focus on Wu’s evangelical convictions to re-cast her as a Chinese-Christian model of highest spiritual and moral virtues.

Wu’s biographers essentially drew on three strategies to re-construct her as a Chinese-Christian female model. The first strategy pertains to the production of her genealogy. Peter Chen-main Wang observes that Christian biographies typically “followed the traditional format” by including family backgrounds that comprised basic information like native place origin and facts about “distinguished members” of the family. What is novel about Christian biographies, Wang adds, is the “Christian information” and “achievements...in the church” by family members who were also considered as important for the person’s Chinese-Christian ancestry.²⁹ Thus, assembling such a genealogy became an important first step to re-invent Wu as a role model. Two important articles that provide the vital family background information about Wu are “Reminiscing about my Great Third Older Sister” by her second younger brother Goh Lok-chor (吳樂助 Wu Lezhu)³⁰ and “Deeply and Intimately Reminiscing” by Ng Phek-loan. Goh’s article furnishes readers with crucial background information about Wu’s parents and siblings, as well as the tragic circumstances that faced the family when she was nine years old.

²⁷ Ng Phek-loan (黃碧鑾 Huang Biluan), “Fakanci” 發刊詞 [Foreword], in *Chin Lien Bible Seminary Fortieth Anniversary Souvenir Magazine* (Hereafter CLBS, 1977), ed. Quek Kiok-chiang and Tay Swee-lan (Singapore: Tiger Press, 1977), 2. Quek Kiok-chiang was a founding member of the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League and became one of the founders of the Singapore Bible-Presbyterian Church Movement in 1955. Ng Phek-loan succeeded Wu as the President and Principal of the League and seminary respectively.

²⁸ See Sim, “Captivating God’s Heart,” 93–94.

²⁹ Wang, “Models of Female Christians,” 167–68.

³⁰ “Goh” is the Hokkien pronunciation for Wu. I use the Hokkien pronunciation of his name as most English articles in the publications address him that way.

In the twenty-ninth year of the former Qing [Emperor] Guangxu, [my] late father Reverend Wu Guozhong [吳國忠] was [undertaking his] pastoral duties in Shenhui village, Jinjiang county, Fujian province. In the next year, the worst plague in the [village's] history occurred...because my late mother Lin Shuzhen took care of the family members of her church members who had encountered difficulty and died...[she] was infected by the plague as well.

Goh then goes on to explain that the plague took the life of his mother, her pregnant child, and his second older sister. The rest of his five siblings escaped unharmed.³¹

Ng's account of Leona Wu reveals even more substantive historical information about her genealogy. Presumably, Ng obtained such knowledge directly from Wu or through her family.³² Ng's account is highly illuminating because of two reasons. First, she drops a bombshell by revealing that Wu's family had royal heritage. Her "remote ancestors" were descendants of Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤—the first Emperor of the Song Dynasty, Song Taizu 宋太祖. To escape possible "extermination of the whole family," they fled to a village in Fujian province, adopted the surname of Wu, and worked as farmers. Second, Ng then traced the Chinese-Christian genealogy of Wu's family by discussing the conversion of her paternal grandparents. Her grandfather Wu Zhaoren 吳招認 had obtained a copy of a Hokkien Christian hymnal from a mission church located at the town center of their village. After her grandparents read one song from the hymnal, the whole family converted to Christianity. Despite the "persecution" that they subsequently received from their relatives and villagers, Wu's grandparents "remained unshakeable" in their new faith. Significantly, Wu Zhaoren became one of the first Chinese pastors in Fujian and his three sons also became pastors. This narrative indicates that there was a complete absorption of Christianity into the Wu family genealogy. The family had moved from a position of being royal descendants to becoming mere commoners, before finally transforming into Christians. It also meant that Leona Wu was following this new familial tradition by

³¹ Goh Lok-chor (吳樂助 Wu Lezhu), "Daonian weida de Sanjie" 悼念偉大的三姐 [Reminiscing About My Great Third Older Sister], *CLBS* (1977): 5.

³² Given that Ng had a particularly close relationship with Wu because she assisted Wu in managing the League and seminary since 1936, it can be argued that Wu would have been willing to reveal such information to her.

becoming part of the “third generation” of full-time Christian workers from her family.³³

One should realize that the provision of such genealogical information was unprecedented in the context of the literature produced by the two institutions. Nonetheless, such information became pivotal in enabling the authors to write about the type of filial piety that Wu practiced in a Chinese-Christian context. Therefore, the second strategy relates to the biographers’ construction of Leona Wu’s filial piety. Wu herself had not mentioned her relationship with her father until 1970 when she wrote an article titled “Heartfelt Wishes.” She recalled that due to her father’s poverty, he could only leave Wu with an “injunction” at his deathbed, calling upon her to “passionately love the Lord.” As with her other writings, Wu drew on this memory not as an example of her filial piety but in order to conduct a “self-examination” (自我檢討 *ziwo jiantao*) on her love for God.³⁴ This incident, however, was converted into an account of Wu’s filial piety by Ng. In particular, she revised Wu’s depiction of the scene at her father’s deathbed, demonstrating how Wu’s presence at her father’s bedside was indicative of the filial piety that she displayed to her father all her life.

At home, she [Leona Wu] was extremely filial [and] respectful to her father, serving [him] by the side for day and night...when her father was about to leave the world, he specially called out to her by name telling her, “Zhenling 貞玲 [Leona Wu], you must passionately love [the] Lord!”³⁵

Here, we can see how Ng transformed the deathbed scene into a fresh narrative of Leona Wu’s Chinese-Christian filial piety. Filial piety, in this circumstance, was not shown by the faithful observance of ancestral rituals after her father’s death but by acts of service and obedience to her father when he was alive, and to his final instruction. Therefore,

³³ Ng Phek-loan (黃碧鑾 Huang Biluan), “Shenqie er qinqie de huainian” 深切而親切的懷念 [Deeply and Intimately Reminiscing], *CLBS* (1977): 9. The song they read/recited was *Zhenzhu Shangdi zao tiandi* 真主上帝造天地 [God Created Heaven and Earth], a popular Hokkien hymn which is still being sung in the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church.

³⁴ Leona Jingling Wu 吳靜玲, “Xinsheng” 心聲 [Heartfelt Wishes], in *Xinjiapo Jidutu budaotuan sanshiwu zhounian jiniankan* 新加坡基督徒佈道團三十五周年紀念刊 [The 35th Anniversary Magazine of the Singapore Christian Evangelistic League], ed. Quek Kiok-chiang, quoted in Poon, *Song Shangjie*, 154–55.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9. “Zhenling” was Leona Wu’s other Chinese name.

in this reading, Wu's subsequent Christian service in Singapore from 1934 to her death in 1974 could also be interpreted as a lifelong act of filial piety in relation to her father's final instruction. Her father's special mention of her also affirmed Wu's filial behavior. This new interpretation of the circumstance was supported by Goh, who praised his sister's faithful filial piety to their father, explaining that she only decided to move to Malaya for work after she had "fulfilled [her] filial duty."³⁶

Goh also added a different dimension to his sister's display of filial piety. Grounding his observations of Wu within the domestic realm, he explained that his sister's filial piety was exhibited from the young age of nine years old when she had taken on the responsibility of managing the household affairs after her mother's and second older sister's deaths during the plague. In a sense, she fulfilled the role of the virtuous daughter by being "in charge of the entire household's chores," including drawing water from the well, cooking, collecting firewood, and washing clothes despite the physical pain and injuries that often came along with these heavy duties. The significance of this aspect of Wu's filial piety was also accentuated by the fact that she was not supposed to have borne such responsibility at that age. Instead, the young girl willingly bore this huge weight on her shoulders because of three factors pertaining to the exigencies of their situation: the long-term absence of her oldest sister due to studies, the fact that Wu had four younger siblings who required parental care, and the absence of her father who was required to carry out pastoral duties during this time of tragedy across the region.³⁷ In all, her willingness and bravery to fulfill this role qualified her as a paragon of Confucian filial piety, at least in the eyes of her brother. Finally, it should be observed that producing this new narrative of Wu would not have been possible without the provision of Wu's family history and genealogical information by her biographers.

The final strategy which the biographers employed was their re-writing of Wu as a spiritual mother. Her brothers and students played an important role in the construction of this new, motherly image. In essence, they argued that Wu capably fulfilled the role of a virtuous mother in three spheres: domestic, institutional, and spiritual. Undeniably, they reified this maternal image of Wu in their writings.

³⁶ Goh, "Daonian weida de Sanjie," 5.

³⁷ Ibid.

Two examples can be used to illustrate this point. Firstly, Wu's fourth younger brother, Wu Hongzhu 吳鴻助, perhaps looked up to her mostly as a mother because she nurtured him physically and spiritually since he was three after his mother died. In his biography about her, he described Leona Wu as both the sister who "arranged his school bag daily" and cultivated his Christian life by leading him in morning devotions and prayers, and by teaching him to sing hymns. Wu was also key in influencing him to become a full-time Christian minister. He recounted how his sister's earnest prayers for him to leave his business career and serve as a minister were extremely effective—he attributed her prayers (together with others who prayed with her) as the reason for causing the "Lord" to "exert pressure" on him to make this career switch.³⁸

Even though Wu was unmarried all her life, her students remade her into the foremost motherly figure of the seminary. The title "spiritual mother" (屬靈的母親 *shuling de muqin*) was first coined during Wu's funeral in 1974 by her students.³⁹ Subsequently, this term was utilized by two students who published their biographical essays of Wu in the 1977 magazine. In particular, one student sought to define the title of spiritual mother by discussing three aspects of Wu's motherliness that made her worthy of this honor: the mother of faith (信心的母親 *xinxin de muqin*), mother of love (愛心的母親 *aixin de muqin*), and mother of many children (多子的母親 *duozi de muqin*). Whilst the student portrayed Wu as a model of Christian spirituality in the first dimension, the latter two dimensions served to idealize her as a compassionate spiritual mother who had gained "thousands of spiritual descendants" because of the effective physical, material, and spiritual support that she showed to her students. Most students, for example, were unable to afford the "boarding expenses" in the seminary. Nevertheless, Wu was always willing and able to secure funding to meet the students' financial expenses. Similarly, Wu showed a capacity to care for her students' spiritual needs by seeking to understand each individuals' life circumstances, faithfully praying for them every morning and even-

³⁸ Wu Hongzhu 吳鴻助, "Nanwang de Sanzi" 難忘的三姊 [Unforgettable Third Sister], *CLBS* (1977): 4. Wu Hongzhu was also known as Washington Wu. He became a well-known revivalist in the 1960s and 1970s.

³⁹ Tay Swee-lan (鄭遂藍 Zheng Suilan), "Jingling nushi xilao anfan tianjia" 靜聆女士息勞安返天家 [Ms. Jingling has Rested from her Labors and Peacefully Returned to the Heavenly Home], *Nanyang Jidutu* (October 1974): 1.

ing.⁴⁰ More broadly, this re-imagination of Wu as a motherly figure gains extra significance in light of the fact that she remained celibate throughout her whole life, neither conforming to the Confucian or Christian ideal of a married woman as being confined to the domestic sphere and subordinated to the authority of her husband. What this meant was that her biographers had to skirt around issues of gender norms and roles in both the Chinese and Christian contexts in order to demonstrate that Wu's actions, behavior, moral purity, and spirituality were sufficient bases to qualify her as a spiritual mother, and by extension, a Chinese-Christian female model for both institutions. In short, by remaking Wu into a spiritual mother, her biographers brought her back into the Confucian "norm."⁴¹

In a way, the biographical portrayal of Wu's moral behavior, filial piety, and compassionate spiritual motherhood conferred her a kind of symbolic power which can be compared to the positive divine feminine qualities projected by the deities Guanyin 觀音, Mazu 馬祖, and the Wusheng Laomu 無生老母. Paul Steven Sangren demonstrates how these deities, through legends and religious beliefs, overcame polluting female characteristics (for example, menstruation, childbirth, etc.) to "preserve" and immortalize their purity. This required them to deny their roles as daughters and wives (thereby refusing to submit to their prescribed relationships in the Five Bonds) and take on the "standing as mothers who have never borne a child," or in the case of Wusheng Laomu, an "unbegotten mother" to all of creation "unstained by the pollution of childbirth." Sangren concludes that these female deities became both "unifying" and "inclusive" maternal figures whose divinities cut across hierarchical, social, and gender divisions (in comparison to the hierarchical and bureaucratic male gods who projected exclusivity and preference for particular groups and communities).⁴² Trying to understand the Chinese-Christian image of Wu in light of Sangren's analysis enables us to perceive her symbolic power more clearly. Though Wu never married, her celibate status enabled her to effectively fulfill the roles of filial daughter and compassionate mother for her father and students respectively. In other words, Wu became a power-

⁴⁰ Zhang Suzhao Rong 張蘇昭容, "Huainian shuling de muqin" 懷念屬靈的母親 [Reminiscing My Spiritual Mother], *CLBS* (1977): 10.

⁴¹ I would like to thank David A. Palmer for his insight here.

⁴² P. Steven Sangren, "Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the 'Eternal Mother,'" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 1 (1983): 11–30. I am grateful to David A. Palmer for pointing me to the work of Sangren on this matter.

ful spiritual figure for Chin Lien to memorialize as she affirmed, rather than negated, two of the three prescribed relationships for females in the Five Bonds through her Chinese-Christian faith. Her celibacy, at the same time, preserved her purity, a desirable feminine quality in both the Christian and Chinese systems of thought. Along with her evangelical spirituality and career achievements, this would have undeniably made her an admired female spiritual model for the Singapore Chinese Protestant community.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The ease with which the three writing strategies were employed, arguably, reflects the maturity of the Chinese Christian biographical tradition in Singapore (and Southeast Asia) during the 1970s; evidently, the writers were adept in shaping a portrait of Leona Wu as both Christian and Chinese by—rather seamlessly—aligning her Christian beliefs and values with Confucian ones. The dominance of her evangelical thought and beliefs were also, in the process, downplayed in order to privilege actions and values that were more concordant with Confucianism. For instance, the writers were keen to stress Wu's approach to her kinship ties and obligations on many matters (including spiritual ones), thereby highlighting and implicitly suggesting her deep respect for Confucian values. On the other hand, the biographies also subtly subverted and transformed these values by illustrating Wu's Christian approach in all matters. In this sense, it would not be far-fetched to suggest that the Christian biographies of Wu could be legitimately seen as a strain about "exemplary lives" within the *zhuan* tradition as Wu's writers strove to eulogize her by drawing on well-established biographical techniques and strategies. At the same time, just as how biographies in 1980s China have been able to "accommodate new, reform-era values," we have observed that this mode of writing has been "flexible enough" to be appropriated by Christians for the incorporation of their religious values.⁴³

⁴³ For more information about these techniques and strategies, see Wang's article "Models of Female Christians." See Dryburgh and Dauncey, "Chinese Life Writing," 44.

By employing the categories found in the analysis of Peter Chen-main Wang, this study has managed to unpack the *zhuan* writings of Leona Wu by historicizing these works within the context of earlier literature that was produced before her death, and also the circumstances facing the institutions which she led. In this sense, the textual-historical approach which I have utilized has demonstrated how the *zhuan* genre became a highly effective tool for reinterpreting the life of an individual through a Confucian framework. At the same time, this approach has incorporated the motives, reasons, and backgrounds of the institutions and individuals who were responsible for the textual “Confucianizing” of Wu. Through such an analysis, we have been able to gain significant historical vantage in understanding how a particular Chinese religious institution and its multiple actors worked to shape and reshape the historiography of their own leader’s life and institutional history.

Finally, two reflections can be made about this study. The first reflection pertains to a question about why there was a need for the two institutions to prove Leona Wu’s “Chinese-ness” in 1970s Singapore by remaking her into a Chinese-Christian model. Of historical significance is the tension between faith and ethnicity/nationality which has been a key factor in shaping discourses on Chinese Christian identity since the nineteenth century. As Chloë Starr highlights, this tension was heightened during the 1920s and 1930s as the Chinese churches (both in China and the Chinese diaspora) searched for answers about their identity by engaging in “intense national discussions on the meaning of ‘China’ as a nation” while constantly trying to overcome the “historical perception” of Christianity’s foreignness by indigenizing its ecclesial structures and seeking autonomy from Western missions. In short, for Christianity to be seen as indigenous (and therefore authentic), the Chinese Christians believed that their faith had to be mediated through the “new Chinese nation” or, by extension, through values, concepts, and structures that were seen as Chinese.⁴⁴ Wu’s biographers also demonstrated similar concerns on their terms. By molding her into a Chinese-Christian model, they sought to illustrate that Wu had been able to overcome the tension between faith and ethnicity

⁴⁴ Chloë Starr, “Maintaining Faith in the Chinese World,” in *Relocating World Christianity: Interdisciplinary Studies in Universal and Local Expressions of the Christian Faith*, ed. Joel Cabrita, David Maxwell, and Emma Wild-Wood (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 217. See also Timothy Tseng, “Protestantism in Twentieth-Century Chinese America: The Impact of Transnationalism on the Chinese Diaspora,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 13 (2008): 121–48.

in her life—that is, she was both a Chinese and Christian who was able to live a pious religious life that melded the key values of both cultures with a high level of authenticity that was deserving of memorialization and following. Here, I am not suggesting that this tension did not exist among the Singapore Chinese churches before the production of her biographies in the 1970s. Rather, what I am proposing is that her *zhuan* writings were reflective of broader attempts to reconcile these historic tensions—which were also captured in the biographies produced by the other churches (as mentioned earlier)—and that her biographers specifically deployed such strategies to demonstrate her successful synthesis of both cultures in order to make her a model exemplar for Chin Lien and the League.

Another possible answer might be that a multi-dimensional narrative about her life that reflected both Chinese and Christian aspects would have resonated with the life experiences of Chinese Christians as it demonstrated that the two traditions could be successfully combined within a Chinese family. This would have been especially comforting for the full-time workers trained by Chin Lien, who would have faced resistance from the Chinese families and communities to which they belonged or with whom they interacted. This is because Christianity would have been seen as not Chinese enough or as too Western.

Another point is that the idea that Wu was able to fulfill her obligations for both her natural and spiritual families would have formed a powerful image for the readership to ponder upon as her filial piety and virtuous nature did not stem from Confucian precepts but her Christian beliefs. Just as how Buddhist filial piety in Tang China worked to demonstrate the compatibility of Buddhism and Confucianism, as well as to show how the same Confucian values could be achieved through observance of Buddhist teachings,⁴⁵ the biographies sought to display that a similar harmony between both traditions had been achieved through the life of an important female Protestant leader in a Singaporean society still dominated by traditional Chinese values and practices.

The final reflection is about the place of Wu's biographies within the broader landscape of modern Chinese theological writings. In Starr's recent major study *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (2016), she argues that:

⁴⁵ Ping Yao, "Tang Women in the Transformation of Buddhist Filiality," in *Gendering Chinese Religion*, 25–31.

Chinese theology has been necessarily tied to the (Chinese) literary forms in which it has been written and that the theological content cannot be separated from its literary expression. The thought is molded by the genre in which it is expressed: we cannot read Chinese theology as if it were written in English.... Chinese theological texts have to be understood in their *textual* context as well as their contextual context.

She further adds that the “interest is how Chinese Christians write and conceive of the tenets of their faith, and what aspects of Christianity come to the fore when Christian thought is conceptualized in Chinese textual modes.”⁴⁶ It is important to note her final point about understanding Chinese theology—that is, laying stress on “how Chinese Christians write” and “conceive” of their faith within their textual and contextual contexts. That is because, historically speaking, many Chinese Christians have not constructed their theologies in (Western) systematic form but through their literary genres and traditions.⁴⁷ If this argument is valid, what this then suggests is that biographical writings about Wu can be conceived as a *type* of Chinese theology.

As we have seen, a common theological theme arising from Wu’s biographies is the interaction between Christian and Confucian values. Through the textual tradition of biographical writings, the writers sought to cast Wu as a Chinese-Christian exemplar in every stroke that was written, seeking to reinterpret her life as a model for future students of Chin Lien, and the broader Singapore Chinese Christian community. Through this, Christianity was re-cast in Chinese tradition while their values were intertwined to demonstrate concordance and harmony. On the one hand, the placement of Confucian and Christian values on the same plane allowed the writers to flexibly reinterpret each tradition in light of the other, thereby suggesting that the boundaries between both traditions remained porous and open for mutual exchange. On the other hand, the writers ensured that there were limits to these mutual exchanges; evidently, aspects of Confucianism that would have been controversial in the evangelical tradition were not given any place for discussion. Wu’s Confucianism remained strictly within the bounds of evangelical orthodoxy. More broadly, her biographies suggest that Confucianism was an important moral category for Chinese

⁴⁶ Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 2 and 11. Author’s emphasis.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 280.

theological construction. Theologizing within the biographical tradition required a grasp of how Christian and Confucian values could be mutually integrated, explained, and presented in a way that was culturally attuned and doctrinally sound.

When one surveys the (auto)biographical monographs written by prominent Chinese evangelicals during the twentieth century, the theme of interaction between Christian and Confucian values constantly emerges. The following two examples are cases in point. In his autobiography, the eminent Chinese fundamentalist pastor Wang Mingdao 王明道 agonized over his decision about committing to full-time pastoral work. On the one hand, while he believed that pastoral work was God's calling for him, he was upset that his decision caused his mother great grief, rendering him unfilial.⁴⁸ Similarly, in the autobiography of another prominent Christian leader Andrew Gih (計志文 Ji Zhiwen), he told the story of how he sought to express his filial piety to his grandmother by constantly praying for her conversion to Christianity and evangelizing her at every chance. Gih then sought to reinterpret Confucian filial piety by suggesting that offering sacrifices to one's parents and ancestors after their death was both "fake" and a form of "superstition" because they "could not eat" the food that was sacrificed in their afterlife. Real filial piety, he added, was ensuring that one's parents are well taken care of while they are alive.⁴⁹ Here, the main point is that if Christian theologizing typically takes place within the textual traditions, cultures, and historical contexts of the Chinese people, then the theme of Christian-Confucian interactions needs to take a prominent place in future analyses of such biographies. In conclusion, what this suggests is that listening to the textual and contextual cues and clues of Wu's biographers is important as they highlight some of the pressing issues of "lived" Chinese theology that may often be suppressed in formal theological texts which frequently adopt Western categorizations.

⁴⁸ Wang Mingdao 王明道, *Wushi nianlai* 五十年來 [These Fifty Years] (Peking: The Spiritual Food Quarterly, 1950), 56.

⁴⁹ Andrew Gih (計志文 Ji Zhiwen), *Wushi nianlai shifeng Zhu* 五十年來事奉主 [Serving the Lord in the Past Fifty Years] (Hong Kong: Sheng Tao Press, 1975), 37–38.