

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303692224>

Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry 1

Article · April 2016

CITATION

1

READS

2,366

1 author:



Yi Liu

Shanghai University

7 PUBLICATIONS 9 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Global Pentecostalism and Christianity in Contemporary China [View project](#)

Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry¹

Liu Yi
Shanghai University

Abstract

Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972) is one of a few Chinese who have had a significant impact on Western Christianity. As the leader of an independent Chinese church, Nee built his international connections through his writing, traveling and personal relations in the mission field. Just before the Communist takeover in 1949, his co-worker Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905-1997) brought the ministry abroad and led great revivals in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and America from 1950s through 1970s. Now, under the direction of Taiwan Gospel Book Room and Living Stream Ministry based in Anaheim, CA, this originally Chinese ministry has developed a global network of Local Churches across the five continents. It is a rare example of an Asian Christianity assuming global significance.

Keywords

globalization; Chinese Christianity; Watchman Nee; Witness Lee; Local Churches.

This research is supported by the National Grant for Social Sciences of China, "Global Pentecostalism and Christianity in Contemporary China" (11CZJ009).

¹ The name for this subject is a problem, for they do not regard themselves as an organization or movement. They are known by various names: "Little Flock," "Assembly Hall," "Local Church," or "Lord's Recovery." In Taiwan, it was registered as the Christian Assembly Hall; in United States, Living Stream Ministry is its legal agency. In most localities, they are just named after the city's name, such as "Church in Los Angeles," "Church in Taipei," and "Church in Shanghai," so "Local Church" becomes a popular label. "The ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee" is an official term they often use, which is also a way to show their respect and acknowledgement of these two persons' work.

Corresponding author

LIU Yi: translation.liu@163.com

INTRODUCTION

On June 9th 1997, after more than sixty years' service for the "Lord's Recovery" (*Zhu de hui fu*),² Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905-1997) went to rest peacefully with God, as Watchman Nee's most intimate co-worker, "a bonds slave of the Lord," and a "God-man." During the memorial service on July 9 of 1997 in Anaheim of southern California, his life, divided into five periods, was recalled: the first period started from 1933 when he was called to serve, through the first three decades of his work both in mainland China and Taiwan; the second period was from 1964 to 1974, beginning with his move to America and ending with his settling in Anaheim; the third period covered his ministry of the New Way in Taiwan from 1974 to 1984; the fourth period (1984-1994), marked by his message about the God-man, was considered the peak of his ministry; the last period was the crowning years of his life from 1994 to his death. In between the recollection of each period, portions from 2 Corinthians chapter two and three were read, describing the six aspects of the New Testament ministry: its triumph, effect, function, competency, glory, and superiority. A controversial figure both in China and in the Christian world, Witness Lee's journey exemplifies a Chinese church becoming globalized as a result of political, religious and international changes in the latter half of the 20th century.³

2 "Lord's Recovery" is a phrase often used for the Local Church movement; it means going back to the original church of the New Testament or to the apostles' time. Its modern history can be traced to the Moravian Brothers in the 18th century as well as the Plymouth Brethren in the 19th century. Watchman Nee and Witness Lee are believed to be the first to introduce this idea in the Chinese context.

3 *Witness Lee: Speakings from the Memorial Meetings* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1997), 7.

WATCHMAN NEE: A SEER OF THE DIVINE REVELATION IN THE PRESENT AGE⁴

The story of Witness Lee cannot be told without reference to Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972), one of the most prominent Chinese Christians who won fame in the English-speaking Christian world due to his works such as *The Spiritual Man* and *The Normal Christian Church Life* (Rethinking the Work/Concerning Our Missions), and as a symbol of persecuted Christians under communist rule.

As a third generation Christian, Nee was saved at the age of 17 under the influence of Dora Yu (Yu Cidu, 1873-1931)'s preaching,⁵ and through the guidance of Margaret E. Barber (1866-1930),⁶ a faith missionary working in Fujian province. Through Miss Barber, he became acquainted with the writings of Jeanne de La Mothe Guyon (1648-1717), G. D. M. Panton (1870-1955), Andrew Murray (1828-1917) and Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861-1927). In addition, the life of George Müller (1805-1898) of Bristol and Hudson Taylor (1832-1905) of the China Inland Mission had a large influence on him. One Sunday evening in 1922, Nee along with his mother and Mr. and Mrs. Leland Wang (Wang Zai, 1898-1975)⁷ remembered the Lord by breaking

4 See Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991). Another influential biography of Watchman Nee is Angus Kinnear, *The Story of Watchman Nee: Against the Tide* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1998).

5 About Dora Yu, see Silas H. Wu, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival in 20th-century China* (Boston: Pishon River Publications, 2002).

6 Margaret E. Barber was sent to China by the Church Missionary Society in 1895. She went to Fuzhou and taught in a girls' school. Seven years later, she left due to the jealousy and slander of her colleagues. Under the influence of David Panton, she separated from the Anglican Church and went to China again at the age of 40. As an independent missionary, she lived in Baiyatan opposite the Luoxing Pagoda ferry of Mawei, where she met Leland Wang and Watchman Nee. On Margaret E. Barber, see James Reetzke, *M. E. Barber: A Seed Sown in China* (Chicago: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2007).

7 Leland Wang, an early co-worker of Watchman Nee, was born in a non-Christian family. In 1920, he converted under the guidance of his wife and left his navy career to serve God in 1921. Separating from Watchman Nee, he was ordained as a minister of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. In 1929, he together with others founded the Chinese Foreign Missionary Union (*zhonghua guowai budaotuan*), the first mis-

bread. They found such joy and release in worshiping God without minister or pastor that they decided to do this frequently thereafter with newcomers joining. This is called the beginning of the “Lord’s Recovery” in China. In 1923, Nee began publishing *The Present Testimony*, which was succeeded by *The Christian* in 1926. In 1927 Nee moved to Shanghai, the center of the Christian movement in China. In 1928, *The Spiritual Man* was published, which is “the first and last book he ever sat down and wrote.” At the same time, a hymn book entitled *The Little Flock* was published in 1930. It was around that time that the group gathered around Nee got its name “Little Flock.”

Nee’s ministry had an international dimension from the beginning. In the 1920s, he visited Malaysia and Singapore and had fellowship with Fujian immigrants there. He visited these areas two more times in the 1930s and 1940s. His key connection was with the British Brethren.⁸ Due to Miss Barber’s introduction of some English books, Watchman Nee wrote to a London publisher, and corresponded with a Mr. George Ware belonging to the strict Darbyite persuasion of the London Brethren. In 1930, Nee had fellowship with an English businessman in Shanghai, Charles Barlow, who was associated with the London Brethren. Barlow was impressed with Nee and facilitated a group of six men and the wives of two of them from the Brethren to visit Shanghai in 1932. In response, Nee was invited to visit Britain and America in 1933. In addition to the arranged trip accompanied by Barlow, Nee also visited George Cutting, author of the widely used gospel booklet *Safety, Certainty and Enjoyment*, and tried to contact T. Austin-Sparks, founder of the Christian Fellowship Center. In 1937, Nee traveled to Europe again. He met T. Austin-Sparks first and they went together to the annual Convention for the Deepening of Spiritual Life in Keswick. He also met W. H. Aldis, Home Director of the China Inland Mission, and D. M. Panton, a close friend of Margaret Barber. In May 1939, just before he left, the English translation of *Rethinking the Work* appeared in London

sionary organization from China to propagate the gospel abroad. Later he got a doctoral degree from Wheaton College, and was known as the “Moody of China.”

8 About the Brethren, see F. Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement: Its Origins, Its Worldwide Development and Its Significance for the Present Day* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2001).

under the title *Concerning Our Missions*. It is in this book that Nee clearly expressed his idea about the ground of the church, which also represented the peak of Nee's thinking.

Early in the 1940s, Nee developed a blueprint of church building in China. However, the war and turmoil in the church prevented him from implementing his program. In 1948, he began to plan the evangelization of China. The new meeting hall in Shanghai and the training in Gul-ing mountain of Fujian province were symbols of a coming revival. He even traveled to Southeast Asia during this period. But, as the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists was ending, he saw no hope for this great dream. Nee had to devise another plan, which was to send one of his most intimate co-workers to explore development overseas while he himself chose to stay with his followers in mainland China as a martyr. During the political campaign in the 1950s, Nee was imprisoned on economic, political and religious charges, and remained a captive till his death in 1972.⁹ While separated from his co-workers and followers, he left with them a legacy of theology and church building. Most importantly, he was fortunate to have a close brother with the talent as a master-builder and the determination and loyalty to continue his ministry.

**WITNESS LEE: A CHRISTIAN MASTER-
BUILDER IN TAIWAN, AMERICA AND THE
WORLD¹⁰**

Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905-1997) was a fourth generation Christian on his mother's side. He was taught at a school founded by Southern

9 On Watchman Nee's fate in Communist China, see Ying Fuk Tsang, *Fandi, aiguo, shulingren: Ni Tuosheng yu jidutu juhuichu yanjiu* [Anti-imperialism, Patriotism and the Spiritual Man: A Study on Watchman Nee and the Little Flock] (Hong Kong: Christian Study Center on Chinese Religion and Culture, 2005); Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," *Church History*, 74: 1 (March 2005), 68-96.

10 Among the Local Churches, Witness Lee was well-known as a "master-builder," especially in contrast to Watchman Nee who is a great seer of divine revelation. Lee himself claimed that he was continuing Brother Nee's ministry. At a meeting

Baptist missionaries and was trained in the Bible through the Brethren of Benjamin Willis Newton's tradition. He was touched by a sermon of Peace Wang (*Wang Peizhen*, 1899-1969).¹¹ He first knew Watchman Nee through the latter's publication. In 1932, Nee was invited to preach in Shandong province where he met Witness Lee and they developed a warm relationship with each other. In 1933, Lee was called to serve the Lord full time and moved to Shanghai in 1934 at Nee's invitation. In Shanghai, Lee worked with Nee in publication and other church affairs, and learned much from the latter. During this period, Lee became one of the most intimate co-workers of Nee. He also helped Nee work through two turmoils in 1934 and in 1946 due to the latter's marriage and involvement in business. In addition, Lee proved his talent as a master-builder even in these early days. In 1942, a great revival broke out in Chefoo (*Yantai*) under Lee's leadership. About eight hundred believers consecrated themselves and all their income to the church which resulted in a migration of these believers to Inner Mongolia and northeast China. He was also beginning to develop his own thought, one of which was his discovery of 'the tree of life'. While denying

of Asian churches in 1981, Lee presented a complete history of the Local Church, which was collected as a two-volume work entitled *Lishi yu qishi* [History and Revelation] (Taipei: Taiwan Gospel Book Room, 2001). For a concise English version, see Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and the Local Churches* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991). On Witness Lee, see Zhuo Zunhong, Zhou Xiuhuan, and Lin Xiuhua, *Jidu yu zhaohui: Li Changshou xiansheng xingyi fangtanlu* [Christ and Church: An Oral Record of Witness Lee's Journey] (Taipei: National Institute of History, 2010).

- 11 Peace Wang was born in the family of a government official of Anhui province. She was educated in the mission school in Hangzhou. After graduating from Jinling Girls' College, she decided to be an evangelist. An early co-worker of Watchman Nee, she had a great influence on Witness Lee personally and worked together to overcome the turmoil in the ministry. In 1956, she was imprisoned along with other co-workers until her death during the Cultural Revolution. Another female co-worker of Watchman Nee was Ruth Lee (Li Yuanru, 1894-1969). She was of great help to Watchman Nee especially in the ministry of the word. Different from Peace Wang and Witness Lee, she was involved in the turmoil against Watchman Nee in the 1940s. From 1950 to 1952, she tried her best to publish Watchman Nee's messages during the training in Guling Mountain. She was also put into prison in 1956 and died in the same year as Peace Wang.

the tree of knowledge as a symbol of Satan, Lee affirmed and promoted the tree of life as a representation of God. For Lee, life is the true way.

In 1949, just before the regime change in mainland China, Lee was sent by Nee to explore new fields in Taiwan. In 1950, they had their last fellowship in Hong Kong. It was in Taiwan that Lee began to show his talents as a church builder. He visited Christians from mainland China along the north-south railway. He also had some practical skills, such as posting gospel advertisements in the street, distributing gospel pamphlets by household, organizing gospel parades with bands and banners, and quickly taking down the new comers' address and keeping in touch with them. The achievement was palpable. By the end of 1949, there were 505 new baptized persons from six gospel preaching events. Their number increased thirty-fold from just over thirty original members to over nine hundred. By the end of 1955 the number of believers in Taiwan had reached forty thousand. Lee also continued Watchman Nee's ministry in other ways. One was the publication of *The Ministry of the Word*. Another was the various conferences and training sessions. He began with a series of studies on sixty crucial topics of truth in the Bible. In 1952, about eighty people quit their jobs and gave themselves to full-time service. Lee intensified his work with a training session that lasted four months starting from September 1953. One hundred and eighty three believers from Taiwan and overseas attended the session and went on to play a founding role in the building and spreading of churches in the Far East. In 1959, Lee held the first large gospel meeting in the Military Stadium (*Sanjun Qiuchang*) of Taiwan with more than ten thousand attendees. Financially, he also received generous support from a Philippine businessman for ten years which not only overcame his financial crisis, but also gave his ministry a solid foundation in Taiwan.

During this period, an episode concerning his relationship with T. Austin-Sparks must be mentioned.¹² Austin-Sparks had been a good friend

12 Theodore Austin-Sparks (1888-1971), usually known as "Mr. Sparks" or just "TAS," was a British evangelist and author. He became a Christian at the age of 17 and was ordained as a Baptist pastor at the age of 24. From 1912 to 1926, he led three congregations in greater London and was closely related to Jessie Penn-Lewis. In 1926, he resigned his ordination and established a conference and training center, the

of Nee in the 1930s. Due to this historical friendship, Austin-Sparks was invited to fellowship in 1955 and 1957. While sharing many similar views, these two men disagreed on the 'ground of the church'.¹³ It also led to the departure of some young co-workers from Lee. Lee visited Austin-Sparks in England in 1958, but they did not reach agreement on this topic. On this trip, he also visited America and other European countries. Another of Lee's achievements in this period was his work in Southeast Asia, which was a continuation of Nee's work before 1949. He visited Malaysia and cared for the church in Hong Kong. Besides Taiwan, the Philippines became his largest concern. From 1950 to 1960, he spent 3-4 months in the Philippines each year. There was also a beginning of the "Lord's Recovery" in Japan. One controversy was when Witness Lee started the practice of 'eating and drinking the Lord' from 1958. The phrase would not be a problem when referring to eating and drinking at Communion, but when applied to reading God's words and living God's life it provoked negative reactions.

In the early 1960s, there was another great move of the "Lord's Recovery." Witness Lee visited the United States for the third time in 1961, and decided to stay there to promote the Lord's work. His concern was that, "America was a leading country of the whole earth and that for the recovery to spread further, the ministry had to be brought into the English-speaking world." At that time, Lee was in his late fifties and had spent most his life in the Chinese-speaking world, but he made up his mind to begin his ministry in English. It was not until 20 years later that he began the Chinese-speaking work in America. His main concern was white

Christian Fellowship Center at Honor Oak in southeast London. In addition, he also published a bi-monthly magazine, *A Witness and a Testimony* from 1923 until his death in 1971. Among his many books, at least three are regarded as Christian classics: *The School of Christ*, *The Centrality and Supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ*, and *We beheld His Glory*.

- 13 "The ground of church" is a key teaching of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's ministry. Literally, it means the location of the church should follow the public administrative boundary. In general, it should be a city. Its origin can be traced to the seven churches in Revelation, and it is said to be the only way to organize churches instead of denominations or sects. So there are only two kinds of churches, the Church as the Body of Christ and the local churches as their physical representatives on earth.

Americans instead of Chinese immigrants. In December 1962, Lee held a conference in the house of Samuel Chang (Zhang Yilun, Nee's brother-in-law) in Los Angeles, where he released messages on *The All-inclusive Christ*. In 1963, he began to publish the magazine, *The Stream*, through which many Christians became acquainted with his ministry. Unlike his work in Taiwan, he paid more attention to the spiritual dimension due to the condition of American Christians. In 1962, he began practicing "calling on the Lord's name" (*Huhan zhuming*) in Los Angeles. In contrast to the generous financial support in Taiwan, Lee experienced financial embarrassment. The saints in Taiwan and America both assumed that the other side had given him adequate support. But this didn't stop or discourage him. He traveled extensively to speak in an old car driven by Samuel Chang, and enjoyed writing hymns on these long trips. In 1965, they acquired a meeting hall on Elden Avenue in Los Angeles. A wave of young people joined after 1969, most of them having been part of the hippie movement. This led to a revival along with the "Jesus Movement" in the 1970s. A group of four to five hundred believers moved from Los Angeles to other main cities of America in 1970. Lee also brought 138 believers from America to Taiwan for a four-week international conference and training session. Through such exchanges, his ministry in Taiwan and America merged.¹⁴ His work spread to Brazil in 1959 through some immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Philippines. Lee visited Sao Paulo in 1964, 1965 and 1967, and in 1975 a group of more than two hundred students joined them. The "Lord's Recovery" also began in South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

In 1974, Lee moved from Los Angeles to Anaheim, and the Living Stream Ministry was established. Lee had a two-fold burden: releasing of 'life-studies' of the Bible¹⁵ and winning more young people for the "Lord's Recovery". While the church in Huntington Beach functioned as

14 About Witness Lee's early days in America, see James Reetzke, *Recollections with Thanksgiving: A Brief History of the Beginnings of the Lord's Recovery in the United States* (Chicago: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2001, 2004).

15 "Life study" represents Witness Lee's interpretation of the Bible. He promoted "life study" as an approach, in contrast to the normal way of reading and learning. His point is that, the Bible is not teaching or knowledge, but a living way. His approach is Christ-centered, focusing on the move of the Holy Spirit.

the frontline for preaching the gospel, the church in Anaheim functioned to support the spread of his ministry. In 1976 he directed his co-workers to move to Long Beach, Fullerton, Irvine, and Cypress for campus work and to start churches. Later, a standard procedure was established, namely, getting children saved and baptized before entering Junior High and then preparing them through their high school and college years to join full-time training. Summer Schools of Truth were also established to train young people. His largest and most important burden was to carry out the “life-study” of the Bible (*shengming dujing*). He said that though a lot of teachers in history had written various books of the Bible with countless commentaries and expositions, most of them touched only the objective and doctrinal aspect of divine revelation while failing to emphasize its life aspect. It would take him more than twenty years to finish this remarkable and exhaustive job. Other things Lee did included the Chinese-speaking meeting since 1982 and the first Chinese-speaking international blending conference during the Chinese New Year holidays of 1983. To better fill the believers’ need, Spanish and Korean language meetings were started in America.

In 1984, at the age of 80, Lee took the decisive step, after much consideration, to go back to Taiwan to study and practice the “New Way” (*xinlu*) for the purpose of providing the “Lord’s Recovery” with a new wineskin. He said that he was specifically burdened over three matters: (1) the practice of the God-ordained way, (2) the establishment of a full-time training center, and (3) the building of a big meeting hall.

Concerning the God-ordained way, he encouraged each saint to be a “normal, living, and vital person” by practicing morning revival and daily overcoming. He further encouraged them to be “normal, organic and functioning members of the Body of Christ” by practicing “begetting, nourishing, perfecting, and building up.” In this way all the saints could begin to function as the New Testament priests. According to Acts 2: 42-46, the church was made up of small groups with the saints meeting from house to house. Lee paid so much attention to this point that, he said, “Heaven can be annulled and the earth can pass away, but we should never forsake the small group meetings.” And he believed that the two-thousand-year-old

tradition of degraded Christianity—“one man speaking with all others listening”—needed to be overthrown. The practice of everyone prophesying as in 1 Corinthians 14:26 must be fully recovered.¹⁶

In the meantime, full-time training in Taiwan began in 1986 (FTTT). He used this training as a laboratory to research the New Way for bringing in the new culture of church life in the “Lord’s Recovery.” This was the practice of begetting, nourishing, perfecting, and building (BNPB). He stated clearly in a letter to the trainees, “Our training is not a school, a theological seminary, or a Bible School to produce professional evangelists. Our training is to cause the young people who have a heart to pursue the Lord to grow in Christ to become living, normal, functioning members in the Body of Christ to build up the Body of Christ directly.”¹⁷

He awakened the churches to the need to produce full-timers for the “Lord’s Recovery,” and encouraged the churches to support one full-timer for every twenty saints. He personally frequently provided financial support to care for the daily necessities of the full-timers. Another goal of this training was to evangelize Taiwan. In January 1989 the trainees were sent to villages all over Taiwan to propagate the testimony of the “Lord’s Recovery.” In five years ninety-three Local Churches were firmly established.

After his success in Taiwan, Lee also tried to promote this New Way in other places. One area was full-time training: in addition to Taiwan, other centers were established in the Philippines in 1984; Anaheim, California in 1989; Moscow, in 1992; Hamilton, New Zealand, in 1993; Jakarta in 1995; Seoul in 1996; and London in 1997.¹⁸

One result of the full-time training was the ability to supply trained people for ministry in other parts of the world. The former Soviet Union

16 On the God-ordained way, see Witness Lee, *The Exercise & Practice of the God-Ordained Way*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996). The vital group is a key factor in the practice of the New Way. For discussion of the vital group, see Witness Lee, *The Vital Groups* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996).

17 From Witness Lee’s letter to the trainers and trainees in the second full-time training on February 5, 1991, <http://www.fttt.org.tw/> (accessed August 30, 2012).

18 For an introduction of the full-time training, see: <http://fta.org/> (accessed August 30, 2012).

was an obvious case. Lee's burden for Russia dated back to 1981. Even during the Soviet era he encouraged the translation, publication, and distribution of materials into the Russian language. He contributed financially for this purpose from his personal pocket and continued his support faithfully over the years. He shared his burden at the International Memorial Day Weekend Conference in May 1991. A migration training in Anaheim was set up for believers with a burden for Russia. On November 4, Lee gave his farewell speech to the first group of full-timers emigrating to Russia. A few days later, the first group of nineteen trainees arrived in Moscow on November 6, 1991, to begin the Lord's work of "recovery" there. The experience also spread to the former communist countries in Eastern Europe: Poland in 1991, Romania in 1994, and Czech in 1996. New work was opened in Hungary, Bulgaria, and Croatia in the late 1990s.

In July 1995, Lee finally finished his voluminous life-study of the Bible.¹⁹ Lee believed that the culmination of divine revelation is God's becoming man in order to make man God so that the two—God and man—may become altogether the same in life, nature, and appearance but not in the Godhead. He also composed a hymn to express this great revelation: "What Miracle! What Mystery!"

From February 1994 until his last public ministry in February 1997, Lee released many messages concerning this topic. In May 1994, he said, "The 'Lord's Recovery' is to build up Zion."²⁰ In February 1996, he explained the two aspects of God's salvation: the judicial aspect is the procedure of God's salvation to fully meet the righteous requirement of his law;

19 The life-study of the Bible has an online study program, radio program, and versions for handhelds, PCs, and E-readers. Ref: <http://www.lifestudy.com/> (accessed August 30, 2012). After this, Lee continued with the Crystallization-study series by special themes. Another important work is the translation of the Recovery Version of the Bible. Witness Lee completed the New Testament. The complete English edition appeared in 1999 and the Chinese version with notes and commentaries was published in 2005. Currently the Recovery Version of the Bible has editions in Spanish, Japanese, Korean, Philippines (north and south), Indonesian, Russian, French, Portugal, Thai, and Malaysian.

20 Witness Lee, *The Practical Points Concerning Blending* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 46.

the organic aspect is the fulfillment of God's salvation through the life of Christ for the believers to be transformed and to grow and mature in the life of God. In October of 1996, he talked the three stages of God's eternal economy, i.e. the three "becomings" of Christ: God becoming flesh, the flesh becoming the life-giving Spirit, and the life-giving Spirit becoming intensified sevenfold to build up the church to issue in the Body of Christ and to consummate the New Jerusalem. In November 1996, he revealed the incorporation of the believers with the consummated Triune God. In the winter training of 1996 and in the Chinese-speaking conference in February of 1997, the last conference of Lee, he concluded that the experience of God's organic salvation equals the reigning in Christ's life. To explain it further, God's complete salvation is for us to reign in life by the abundance of grace (God himself being the all-sufficient supply for our organic salvation) and the gift of righteousness (God's judicial redemption applied to us in a practical way).²¹

On June 9, 1997, Witness Lee died peacefully as "a bond slave of the Lord," Nee's most intimate co-worker, and a 'God-man'. As an heir of Watchman Nee and a master-builder, he pushed the global expansion of the ministry to every main continent; at the same time, he also reached a new peak of the divine revelation through this process. During the last two years, he greatly enjoyed church life in Anaheim, as his "home church" and "the paradise of God." He was still preparing for the first international Spanish-speaking conference to be held four days later when he died. The Hsinchi Building was to be finished less than one year later, a symbol of his work in Taiwan. Ironically, Lee seemed to have no word for mainland China, the largest remaining mission field and the original place of his

21 These "High Peak" truths are discussed in *The High Peak of the Vision and the Reality of the Body of Christ* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994); *The Organic Aspect of God's Salvation* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996); *The Secret of God's Organic Salvation: "the Spirit Himself with Our Spirit"* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996); *The Experience of God's Organic Salvation Equaling Reigning in Christ's Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996); *Incarnation, Inclusion, and Intensification* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996); *The Holy Word for Morning Revival: The New Jerusalem: The Highest Point of the Apostles' Living and Work* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1997).

ministry, even though the restoration of Hong Kong was the most impressive event for Chinese in the same year.

GLOBALIZATION OF CHINESE CHRISTIANITY: ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITATIONS

The ministry continues to expand after Witness Lee's death through his co-workers in Taiwan and the United States.²² The Hsinchi Building in the diamond area of Taipei, just a few minutes' walk to Taipei 101, was finally completed. It has a museum about Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's ministry and a large meeting hall for two thousand people.²³ A larger piece of land was bought in Anaheim, California, and used to build convention centers with a capacity for four to six thousand people. The gospel work continues in America with programs such as "Bible for America" and "GTCA" ("Gospelize, Truthize, and Churchize America").²⁴ However, China is destined to be a major field for the future, and students and scholars coming to America have become the first target. In 2003, the "Mainland Scholars/ Students Work" was formally established. Two former scholars from mainland China took the lead in this new program.²⁵ There are also gospel workers among the Chinese migrant workers, white collar professionals, university students, and businessmen, especially in coastal cities such as Shanghai and Xiamen. Known as "Local Church," "the Lord's Recovery" or "the Yellers," the ministry became a target of China's security departments and the agencies of religious administration. However, representatives from the Living Stream Ministry managed to contact and communicate with the relevant government officials. Through an unofficial compromise, its meetings were recognized. In fact, the ministry shares

22 The Taiwan Gospel Book Room and the Living Stream Ministry are two front organizations of the Local Church. Readers can get access to them at: <http://www.twgbr.org.tw>; <http://www.lsm.org/> (accessed August 30, 2012).

23 The building is located at the intersection of Hsinye Road (Xinyi lu) and Keelong Road (Jilong lu), so it is called Hsinchi Building (Xinji dalou). Xinji means faith in Christ.

24 Ref: www.bibleforamerica.org; <http://gtca.us/> [last access on August 30, 2012].

25 Ref: <http://mswe1.com> (accessed August 30, 2012).

many features with China's house churches. There are no exact statistics, but it is estimated that there are about eighty to a hundred thousand followers in mainland China. In Shanghai alone the number ranges from five to eight thousand.²⁶

Though it has been claimed that they are not an organization and have no headquarters, the Local Churches undoubtedly have formed a global network with distinctive characteristics that make it look like a denomination. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is estimated that there are about 173 churches in Taiwan with two hundred thousand baptized believers, among whom 120,000 are keeping normal contacts with the church and about 60,000 are participating in the church affairs regularly and actively. There are 60,000 baptized believers in the Philippines, 3,500 in Singapore, 11,000 in Malaysia, 1,500 in Thailand, 2,800 in Hong Kong, 3,000 in Japan, 50,000 in South Korea, 4,500 in India, 80 in Sri Lanka, 50 in Saipan, 1,500 in Vietnam, and 160 in Cambodia. In South America, there are about 600 churches and 20,000 believers; there are 1,500 in Ghana, 800 in Nigeria, and 200 in South Africa. There are about 500 in Australia and 1,100 in New Zealand. In total, there are about 3,500 churches and 500,000 believers.²⁷ The statistics may not be reliable, but one thing is sure: Local Churches are found in every continent. The fact itself is amazing: a church from the non-Western world has become globalized. Furthermore, following the principles of the "Local Church," the converts in every locality are mainly people of local origin rather than Chinese immigrants.

26 The number of Christians in China is one of the most curious and controversial issues. Regarding the case of the Local Church, there are several versions according to the author's experience. This number came from a responsible local brother when the author just started this research in 2011. The estimate of one million in China and 100,000 in Shanghai is probably exaggerated, as it is not corroborated by other global statistics.

27 These figures are from Zhuo Zunhong, Zhou Xiuhuan, and Lin Xiuhua, *Christ and Church: An Oral Record of Witness Lee's Journey*, 167-187, 196-212. In Lee, *Lishi yu qishi* [History and Revelation] and the memorial pamphlet of Witness Lee, there are also some general estimates for 1981 and 1997. However, according to the author's communication with some leading persons of the movement, there is no exact statistics of its members. Sometimes, they do not even know where these numbers come from. Generally, it is said that there are 250,000 to 500,000 believers.

How did all this happen? Mission and immigration are two methods that make possible the trans-national movement of Christian churches. The international dimension of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's ministry is no exception, since it began with Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia, especially among the Fujian people. However, its global development can be attributed to its strong conversional emphasis and Lee's beginning his ministry in America in English rather than Chinese. It is in the United States that Witness Lee solidified his vision and purpose in building a global ministry. Both his choice of America and the English language are clearly intentional. One important factor in his success was the ministry of the Word. Both Watchman Nee and Witness Lee paid close attention to the use of the English language.²⁸ While reflecting the traditional Chinese respect for literature, this emphasis not only projected an image of Christianity not just as the religion of the poor, but also one that goes beyond the mountains and rivers of China, over national boundaries and great oceans. Their strategy transcended mental barriers and led to the formation of a global fellowship within one Body. Practical and organizational skills were also a contributing factor to its success, such as the gospel band that Lee established in Taiwan and his emphasis on the need for keeping touch with each other. Vital group dynamics and the practice of calling on the Lord's name are effective innovations of Lee. New technologies, especially the internet and other new media, will continue to prove their effectiveness in the future. However, we cannot deny the contextual factors in this process, such as the condition of Christians in China in the 1920s, the political situation in Taiwan in the 1950s, and the hippie environment in America in the 1970s. Now the spiritual crisis that is developing after three decades of reform and opening up in China is providing a new opportunity which has turned China into the most promising mission field of our time. So, though Witness Lee did have a global vision and mission since his work in US, the Chinese prove to be his most solid and potential group. Although it appears that development is limited by its place of origin, people and

28 An example is the development of the Taiwan Gospel Book Room. See *Taiwan fuyin shufang liushinian: fengman zouguo yijiazi, 1949-2010* [Sixty Years of the Taiwan Gospel Book Room] (Taipei: Taiwan Gospel Book Room, 2010).

language, what Lee wanted to build is a global fellowship with a strong Chinese character.

All in all, both theologically and historically, it is “God’s economy” that determines the success story of the Local Churches.²⁹ As in other parts of the non-Western world, indigenization is also seen as a key factor in the spread of Christianity in China. And to a great extent, it is also a criterion for evaluating success, especially in comparison to the experience of Buddhism. However, a general shortcoming of the historiography of Christianity in China is that scholars are too familiar with the Chinese context and pay too much attention to Chinese distinctiveness, while simultaneously ignoring the characteristic of Christianity itself as a global religion that has developed successfully throughout the world. The author has no intention of denying the indigenization explanation and believes its interpretative capability to some extent. However, from a global and religious perspective, we should go beyond this, and look for alternative factors. As some recent research shows, the success of the Chinese independent church may lie in its continual and resolute search for a true and right church rather than accepting a model imported by missionaries or a synthesis of Christianity and Chinese culture.³⁰

CONCLUSION

There is no easy way. While appreciating the success of the “Local Church,” we have to understand the endeavor and even struggle that

29 “God’s economy” is a popular term in Witness Lee’s ministry. A word from the New Testament, it means the administration of the God’s household and represents God’s plan in this world. See Witness Lee, *The Economy of God* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1968; 2005); *God’s New Testament Economy* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1986); *The Divine Economy* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1986). Another related key term is “Lord’s Recovery.” See Witness Lee, *Concerning the Lord’s Recovery* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1983); *A Brief Presentation of the Lord’s Recovery* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1990).

30 For this, the author was inspired by Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye’s research on the True Jesus Church, see Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, “Miraculous Mundane: The True Jesus Church and Chinese Christianity in the Twentieth Century,” PhD Dissertation at Harvard University, 2010.

made it possible. In 2009, a former critic of the “Local Church,” the *Christian Research Journal*, published a special issue entitled “We Were Wrong.”³¹ As a symbolic action, it represents a new assessment of the status of the “Local Church,” after nearly half century’s struggle in the context of American Christianity. The “Local Church” boomed in the local environment of southern California, along with a lot of other “New Testament churches.” Neighboring the well-known Fuller Theological Seminary, it also learned something from the church growth experts there; or at least, it does share some commonalities with the latter.³² However, if there is a booming “Christian market,” it also means competition. In the vast field of American Christianity, opportunity and challenge always come together. Sometimes the situation is so difficult that the “Local Churches” have to “sue in front of Caesar” for their rights and legitimacy.³³ Actually, they do rely on “Caesar” for their legal status, though religious and professional authorities are more important. In 2009, Watchman Nee became one of the few non-Westerners to be praised by the US Congress. This event can be seen as another symbol of the ministry’s development in America.

31 See *Christian Research Journal* 32 no. 6 (2009). It was published by the Christian Research Institute based in Charlotte, North Carolina. The editor, Hank Hanegraaff, is also host of the *Bible Answer Man* broadcast. In the middle of 1970s, there was a conflict between the Local Church and the Christian Research Institute due to the latter’s evaluation of the former as a cult.

32 Southern California is really a nest of various new churches. Fuller Theological Seminary provided theological sources for the new developments. Most influentially, the church growth professor, Peter Wagner, published numerous books on the new trends, e.g. *The New Apostolic Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Press, 1998).

33 In the 1980s, the conflict between the Local Church and some publishers came to a point where the former sued them in court. Though they won the suit, it brought harm to the ministry. Some prominent scholars were quoted to support them, including J. Gordon Melton (Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion), John Albert Saliba, S. J., Eugene Van Ness Goetchius (professor of Biblical Languages), Rodney Stark (past President of Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and Association of Sociology of Religion), H. Newton Malony (professor of psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary), and Edwin S. Gaustad (past president of the American Society of Church History).

However, in its Chinese homeland, the “Local Church” is still operating as a “house church,” with small groups of fifteen to twenty meeting in private apartments or houses. To a great extent, they are targeted as an “evil cult” (*xiejiao*) and called “the Yellers” (*huhan pai*). Some scholars think that the “Local Church” was a model for the house churches in China due to similarities in their publications and organization.³⁴ But, mostly “the Local Churches” keep their distinctiveness and are separate from other groups, claiming that they are the true church and the most suitable church model in China. The struggle in the American context may have ended. However, in mainland China, their original and future mission field, they still face great challenges both politically and religiously. This is the most important task for the “Local Churches” as they enter a new stage of development.³⁵

About author

LIU Yi (Ph.D., Chinese University of Hong Kong) is Associate Professor of History at Shanghai University. He is author of *Religion and Politics in a Global Context* (Shanghai: Shanghai University Press, 2011).

34 See Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in China* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), chapter 9.

35 E.g. a symposium on Watchman Nee was held in Taiwan in December 2011. Some mainland scholars joined the discussion with church members from Taiwan. The author presented a paper in this symposium, entitled “Universal Body & Local Churches: Watchman Nee’s Legacy in the Chinese Context.”