

Inspired, Instructed, and Enlivened for The Future: Encouragement and Lessons from Asian Christian Witnesses

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“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Looking to Jesus is fundamentally important for Christians in facing new challenges and opportunities. Jesus is “the founder and perfecter of our faith,” the exalted Suffering Servant who faithfully endured unfathomable pain “for the joy that was set before him.” It is Jesus’s exemplary endurance that his followers are to “consider” closely “so that [we] not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Goh Ewe Kheng (吴有庆, 1924-2014) is one witness who looked to Jesus from a young age. He began to follow Jesus in 1935 after hearing evangelistic messages by Dr. John Sung on the island of Penang (present-day Malaysia), where Goh was still growing up as an 11-year-old boy. In 1949, Goh and his new wife, Teh Phaik Hong, moved to Singapore to establish the branch operations of Tithes Dental & Photo Supply Ltd, Teh’s father’s business. Goh and Teh were blessed with five children and eventually several grandchildren. Moreover, over the course of 65 years in and near Singapore Goh was involved in numerous Christian ministries—including the Gideons, Scripture Union, prison ministry—as well as in the founding of numerous churches, including the now 4,000-plus-member Church of Singapore. It is no wonder that Goh has been described as a “quintessential minister in the marketplace” (Yap, 2023).

Wáng Zhì (王峙, 1903-1998), widely known as Wilson Wang, was another Asian witness who looked to Jesus throughout a long and fruitful life in this world—in Wang’s case for over 94 years. Born in Fuzhou, China, Wáng came to Christ in 1922 while on a Chinese navy career path. Wáng and several other young men—including his older brother Leland and Watchman Nee—would regularly visit two British missionaries stationed outside Fuzhou, and all of them eventually spread the gospel in China and much of Southeast Asia. For his part, Wáng affiliated with The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), edited the C&MA Chinese-language Bible Magazine, served briefly as principal of Singapore Bible College, and utilized his fluency in English and several Chinese dialects to speak and preach in (among other settings)

Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and the US—all the while partnering with his wife Beatrice in raising their five children (Wang, 2023).

While hearing stories of earlier stalwarts in the Faith may inspire us today, in reality we Evangelicals—including those of us involved in the modern missions movement—struggle to connect the past with the present or future. To be sure, Evangelicals have studied historical examples that are to be either emulated or avoided.

Goh Ewe Kheng and Wáng Zhì are just two of an innumerable host of Christian witnesses throughout Asian history who faced “Challenges and Opportunities in [their] New Normal World(s)” in the aftermath of displacement, war, political change, and other dramatic changes—changes that we today similarly face in approaching “Missions in the Post-Pandemic Era.” Receiving “Encouragement and Lessons from Asian Christian Witnesses” who have gone before us can help us today be “Inspired, Instructed, and Enlivened for the Future” that is filled with unknown challenges and opportunities.

LIVING WITH HISTORY

While hearing stories of earlier stalwarts in the Faith may inspire us today, in reality we Evangelicals—including those of us involved in the modern missions movement—struggle to connect the past with the present or future. To be sure, Evangelicals have studied historical examples that are to be either emulated or avoided. However, Evangelicalism has been birthed within, and shaped by, modernity’s objectification of history such that the past “appears as static, a picture or tableau vivant of a bygone culture”; and, what is “modern” has become “detached from [the past] in a new, autonomous cultural space.... The modern mind grew indifferent to history, for history... became useless to its projects” (Schorske, 1998, pp. 3, 4). We Christians who live in the continuing wake of modernity—perhaps preeminently we who have been particularly shaped by the contemporary world’s single most influential superpower, the United States of America—have been hard-wired to approach

challenges and opportunities with historical amnesia and self-generated ingenuity.

With regard to Asians, it is important first to note that the concept “Asian” is unquestionably “extremely complex and overwhelmingly vast” (Koyama, 1984, p. 435). For example, the mapping attempt by the ancient Greek cartographer Strabo in c. 30 AD shows the challenge of grasping merely the outline of Asia’s massive size: <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/strabo.html?sortBy=relevant>. The c. 1544 “First [European] Printed Map of Asia” by Sebastian Munster in Basle below demonstrates the challenge of depicting Asia’s topographical complexity: <https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/78353/first-printed-map-of-asia-neuw-india-mit-vilen-anstossen-munster>. Ephraim Pagitt was not able to show much more detail of Asia’s interior almost 100 years later, seen in this 1636 map he produced in London: <https://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/36861/christianographie-asia-pagitt>. Jesuit-Chinese collaboration produced similar detail, as in this Wanguo Quantu (萬國全圖) from the 1620’s: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kunyu_Wanguo_Quantu#/media/File:JesuitChineseWorldMapEarly17thCentury.jpg. Today’s satellite imaging and other technologies enable more detailed and accurate mapping of Asian geography. However, manifold other “Asian” facets—perhaps most especially traits of various Asian people—present complexities and nuances that defy simple characterizations.

Even so, it is safe to say that in general Asians, including Asian Evangelicals, have had to come to terms with the coming—over the past half-millennium, and most certainly over the past two centuries—of Westerners as “historical agents of modernization [and] secularization.” These two revolutionary processes have clashed with the massive variety of ancient and resilient Asian historical and religious backgrounds (Koyama, 1972, 229). Therefore, in thinking of “Missions in the Post-Pandemic Era,” Asian Evangelicals face the additional complex challenge of having embraced a faith that has modern, “ahistorical” modern traits, all the while carrying deep Asian historical and religious sensibilities. (Other non-Western Evangelicals—African and Latin American, in particular—similarly face such a complex challenge.)

Despite such challenges, intentionally seeking to live and think with history—not against or without history, as modern thinking conveys—is important for Asian Evangelicals constructively to face post-Covid challenges and opportunities. To elaborate, Asian Evangelicals are to utilize “elements of the past... in the cultural construction of the present and future”; and, they are to understand themselves to live in “the flow of social time” (Schorske, 1998, pp. 3-5). Asian churches, mission agencies, and Christians are neither approaching a totally “New Normal World” of post-Covid realities, nor are they constrained to turn their backs on their Asian heritages in determining how to approach post-pandemic challenges. There

are historical, cultural, and experiential continuities between pre- and post-Covid challenges and opportunities; between Asian Christians’ heritages and the current generation’s traits; and, between how earlier generations of Asians dealt with adversity and how today’s Christians will take part in God’s mission.

At the same time, living with history does not entail turning a blind eye to genuinely new contemporary realities. Prior to 2020, no Asians—indeed no human beings—had ever experienced (earlier widespread pandemics notwithstanding) the kind of global lockdown everyone has had to endure due to the Covid outbreak. Similarly, no Asians living two generations ago had ever dreamed of WeChat, TikTok, KakaoTalk, WhatsApp, Weibo, QQ, SNOW, LINE, Youku, Naver, Bilibili, or any such electronic communications platform. A generation or two before that there was neither the United Nations structure nor all of the national boundaries that are enforced (and sometimes disputed) throughout Asia today. While international trade is not new in Asia, today’s ever globalizing cities and megacities in Western Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia are genuinely new.

ENGAGING PAINFUL HISTORIES

An additional obstacle to living intentionally with Asian history consists of having to revisit painful wounds from numerous conflicts and injustices—many of which are ongoing. Most parts of Asia have been dealing with international tensions, and often open conflicts, resulting from newly created boundaries or territorial claims related to imperial incursions, withdrawals, and decisions. Indeed, all regions of Asia have numerous such struggles, be they in West Asia (e.g., Israel-Palestine, Northern Iraq), Central Asia (e.g., Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan), South Asia (e.g., India-Pakistan, Bangladesh-Myanmar), Northeast Asia (e.g., South Korea-North Korea, South Korea-Japan, China-Taiwan), or Southeast Asia (e.g., islands and waters in the “South China Sea” involving China-Philippines/Vietnam/Malaysia/Brunei/Taiwan). Many conflicts that go back much further in history also undergird ongoing tensions—including Israel-Palestine and Korea-Japan. Acknowledging the living connection between the present and the past necessarily entails working through the pain of enduring wounds and lasting effects of permanent scars.

Christians are not immune to painful histories, nor are they exempt from responsibly working toward healing, justice, and reconciliation. Merely hoping that time will heal past wounds, or that focusing on Christian ministry will somehow dry up the deep undercurrents of unresolved trauma, are both wishful thinking. Bringing out into the light what might seem more manageable were it to remain hidden away in some dark, locked closet of the past is essential for

truth and reconciliation to hold sway—even in those Asian cultural settings that traditionally deal with conflict more indirectly, with nuanced subtlety, or by avoidance altogether.

Evangelicals involved in missions face an added hindrance to dealing with wider, difficult, and complicated historical matters. The evangelical movement's pervasive focus on Unreached People Groups (UPGs), sparked by Ralph Winter's plenary address to the first Lausanne Congress in 1974 (Lausanne Movement, n.d.a), had the accompanying effect of dissipating Evangelicals' concern about socio-political matters—even though the Lausanne Covenant spoke to the importance of "Christian Social Responsibility (Lausanne Movement, n.d.b). In actuality, part of what led to the formation of the Lausanne Movement was a reaction against the World Council of Churches' perceived "universalism, syncretism, and the premise that social action and political liberation [emphasis added] can be construed as evangelism" (Plowman, 1974). Viewed negatively, the evangelical commitment that "cross-cultural evangelization needs to be the primary task of the Church" (Lausanne Movement, n.d.b) can serve as a hindrance to, and convenient avoidance of, facing painful and difficult histories.

Most constructive for working through painful histories is for Christians (and others) on different sides of an inherited conflict to seek truth and reconciliation together. For Asian Christians, that means participating in such efforts as that of "Creating New Narratives" conducted by the Holy Land Trust, wherein participants from differing groups—including Jews, Christians, and Muslims—come together to create a "deeper understanding of identity, conflict narrative, tolerance, active listening, and how trauma shapes conversations in one's community" (Holy Land Trust, 2023). The "Northeast Asia Reconciliation Initiative" (NARI) is another exemplary attempt with several goals, one of which is to "engage key areas of contextual challenge in the region" (NARI, n.d.) rather than avoiding them. As noted earlier from Hebrews, looking to Jesus is connected to, and enhanced by, noting the "cloud" of those who have gone before us. Living with history, working through inherited trauma, and studying the lives of predecessors are all part of learning to face present and future challenges and opportunities.

DICTIONARY OF CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY IN ASIA (DCBASIA)

Concretely going about studying history is of course a wide open, multifaceted, and potentially unwieldy endeavor. For the sake of discussing that endeavor in a manageable and concrete manner, the focus here will be on learning biographies of Asian Christians. In particular, a new and growing resource for Asian Christian biographies will be introduced and examined here, namely the Dictionary of Christian

Biography in Asia (DCBASIA) (Dictionary of Christian Biography in Asia, 2023a).

This essay has already utilized the DCBASIA in introducing the sketches of Goh Ewe Kheng and Wáng Zhì (王峙). At the time of writing (late March 2023), these biographies are two of 161 on the DCBASIA site. That total is significant in light of the site having been launched only about one year ago, on 17 April 2022. The hope and plan is for the number of biographies to increase significantly.

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It is important to note that biographies of women, as well as of non-Asians who have influenced Asian Christianity, are most welcome. For example, Sophia Blackmore (1857-1945) was an Australian who served as a missionary in Singapore for 40 years. Obstacles and changes characterized her early years of service: the Australian Methodist Church to which Blackmore belonged did not send single female missionaries overseas; and, when she set out as a missionary anyway, she was headed for China via India. Through various encounters Blackmore affiliated with the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the American Methodist Episcopal Church, then opened the Tamil Girls' School in Singapore. Later, having made good progress in learning the Baba Malay language, Blackmore responded to yet another request and began teaching Chinese girls, leading to the Anglo-Chinese Girls' School and eventual boarding school. Blackmore also started a Baba church for the Straits Chinese (in Singapore), translated many hymns into Malay, and published a Baba Malay Christian periodical called Sahabat ("Friend") tailored to women (Teng, 2023).

OTHER DATABASES

While the DCBASIA is being highlighted here, some other important databases should also be noted. Two are China focused: the Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity (BDCC) (Biographical

Dictionary of Chinese Christianity, 2023a) and the China Historical Christian Database (CHCD) (China Historical Christian Database, 2020a). The BDCC was launched in 2006 with a goal “to narrow the gap between current reference materials and contemporary Chinese Christian demography.” With entries in English and in Chinese, this valuable resource provides access to “essential biographical facts of Chinese and foreign Christian missionaries, church leaders, evangelists, and laity chiefly responsible for laying the foundations and advancing the growth of Chinese Christian communities and their influence in societies around the world” (Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity, 2023b). The CHCD went public more recently, in 2020. This ambitious database is not restricted to biographies but seeks to “provides users the tools to discover where every Christian church, school, hospital, orphanage, publishing house, and the like were located in China, and it documents who worked inside those buildings, both foreign and Chinese” (China Historical Christian Database, 2020b). The CHCD is a collaborative project involving multiple educational institutions and aims to provide as thorough and detailed information imaginable about Christian individuals, organizations, churches, and movements.

An important precursor and model for both the BDCC and the DCBAsia is the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB). The DACB was launched online in 1998 with the mission “to collect, preserve, and make freely accessible biographical accounts and church histories – from oral and written sources – integral to a scholarly understanding of African Christianity.” Over the course of its now over 25 years of existence, the DACB has grown to have over 3,000 biographies in four languages, a Journal of African Christian Biography, thematic research projects, and educational resources (Dictionary of African Christian Biography, 2023). As noted earlier, the DACB has willingly served the creators of both the BDCC and the DCBAsia in providing counsel and, just as importantly, incentive through its own pioneering example of a freely accessible online biographical dictionary.

DCBASIA PARTICULARS

As noted elsewhere in this essay, the DCBAsia website URL is <https://dcbasia.org/>. The site is free to use by anyone who has internet access. Bishop Dr. Hwa Yung, Bishop Emeritus of the Methodist Church of Malaysia, has been particularly instrumental in envisioning the DCBAsia. Dr. Tai Kim Teng has assumed the responsibility of DCBAsia Executive Director (Dictionary of Christian Biography in Asia, 2023b). DCBAsia’s two main sponsors are Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM) and Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF); DCBAsia.org operates under the auspices of STM and is based at the STM campus in Seremban, Malaysia (Dictionary of Christian

Biography in Asia, 2023c).

Navigation on the site is easy and intuitive. Clicking the pull-down menu for “Guidelines & Submissions” on the homepage shows “Biographies” and “Christian Histories” links to the appropriate instructions for making those types of submissions.

DCBAsia aims to have as many biographical sketches from throughout Asia as possible. Brief “Christian Histories” of movements, periods, churches, institutions, or other similar topics related to Asian Christianity are also welcome. While English is assumed to be the most widely used language for DCBAsia entries—since English is the most widely shared language throughout Asia—other languages are also welcome and indeed encouraged, either as originally used for composing an entry or as a translation (of English or of another language).

Those who submit entries for consideration do not have to be specially trained historians or scholars. Anyone who believes that a particular Asian Christian (or non-Asian Christian who had Asia-related influence) or other Asian “Christian History” should be more widely known should feel free to contact DCBAsia about making a submission. As stated on the DCBAsia homepage, “an invitation is extended to all Christians irrespective of creed to contribute towards its success and future growth by praying for us, supporting us, contributing stories, or sharing this resource with your friends” (Dictionary of Asian Christian Biography, 2023a). Collaboration and mutual encouragement are vital for the DCBAsia’s ministry to flourish.

Concrete instructions are on the “Guidelines & Submissions” section of the DCBAsia website. One important set of parameters is that entries are to be approximately 500 to 1500 words (or non-English script equivalent). The ultimate length will depend on the subject’s degree of influence, as suggested by the submitter and decided by the appropriate DCBAsia editorial committee.

The DCBAsia seeks to speak for all of Asia. At the time of writing, because of having been developed and launched in Malaysia the large majority of DCBAsia entries are understandably Malaysia-related—as clicking on the “Stories” homepage heading shows. To help move DCBAsia toward becoming more genuinely pan-Asian, five regions (West, Central, South, Northeast, and Southeast) will have their own executive and editorial committees. As of late March, scholars related to South Asia and to Northeast Asia are already working to form these committees and expand the entries on the DCBAsia site. Those of you receiving information here about the DCBAsia are encouraged to help by making submissions, encouraging others to make submissions, and otherwise collaborating with those involved with expanding DCBAsia’s usefulness. The search function for the Stories is designed to accommodate multiple languages and categories.

One more current example of the multifaceted

and instructive character of DCBAsia stories is that of George Vergis (1921-2017). Born in India, Vergis eventually served as an educator and priest of the Mar Thomas Church in Malaya/Malaysia. Like many he endured the war years of the early 1940s, in Vergis's case in southern Malaya under Japanese occupation. Vergis learned Japanese, eventually married and had two children, and led a varied and fruitful life of service (Vergis, 2023).

To God be the glory through such testimonies of the growing cloud of witnesses presented on the DCBAsia website. May God provide much encouragement and countless lessons from these Asian Christian accounts to inspire, instruct, and enliven Christians today who must creatively face a challenging post-pandemic future.

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