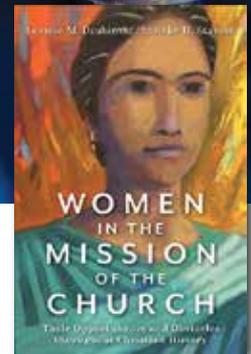


Chinese Women Led the 20th-Century Revivalist Movements

Adapted from **LEANNE M. DZUBINSKI** and **ANNEKE H. STASSON**.
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During the early 20th century, several remarkable Chinese women led a revivalist movement in the Chinese church.¹ First, there was Dora Yu (Yu Cidu), who grew up in a Christian family and in 1896 was one of the first graduates of Soochow Women's Hospital.² In 1897, Yu became "the first cross-cultural Chinese missionary in modern times."³ She traveled to Korea, where she served as the mission doctor, helped to establish a girls school, preached, wrote curriculum, and taught girls how to make lace and embroider.⁴ Despite all this work, the mission initially refused to call her a "missionary;" instead,

she had the lower and less-well-paid position of "Bible woman." As a Bible woman, she visited women in their homes and shared the Gospel with them. During one year alone, Yu visited with 925 women and 211 children.⁵

Not surprisingly, after such a strenuous schedule, Yu's health deteriorated and she was forced to return to China in 1903. The next year, she gave up practicing medicine and "established what might be called the first Chinese faith mission," living without a guaranteed salary from a missionary organization.⁶ She also learned to trust God for the messages that He asked her to give at prayer meetings.⁷

Yu had vibrant faith, often hearing God's voice giving her strength and direction. During a particularly

1 Silas H. L. Wu, "Dora Yu (1873-1931) Foremost Female Evangelist in Twentieth-Century Chinese Revivalism," in *Gospel Bearers, Gender Barriers*, ed. Dana Robert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 86.

2 Wu, 89.

3 Wu, 85.

4 Silas H. L. Wu, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival in 20th Century China* (Boston, MA: Pishon River, 2002), 89.

5 Wu, 94.

6 Wu, "Dora Yu (1873-1931)," 92.

7 Wu, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival*, 128.

low point in her life, God sent her a dream where He reminded her of his love.⁸ Held in God's love, Yu conducted prayer meetings in Chinese, English, and Korean. Many Chinese came to faith through her work.⁹ She published *Hymns of Reviving*, "probably the first such book in Chinese church history" and became the first Chinese woman to establish a Bible school to educate people who became Christians.¹⁰ Reflecting on this amazing woman, Silas Wu called Dora Yu "the foremost female evangelist in twentieth century Chinese revivalism."¹¹

Other prominent Chinese woman evangelists during this period include Peace Wang (Wang Peizhen) and Ruth Lee (Li Yuanru). Peace Wang's story is particularly striking. Not growing up in a Christian family, she became a Christian at school.¹² When Wang's family discovered she was a Christian, her father pulled her from school. For 18 months, Wang unsuccessfully pleaded with her parents to send her back. One night in 1918, she snuck out of the house long enough to attend one of Dora Yu's revival meetings, where she gave her life to God. Wang believed that she was called to serve God as an evangelist, but she was engaged and knew that ending her engagement would disgrace her family. She was torn over her decision.¹³ But the following Scripture kept resurfacing in her heart, *Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.*¹⁴ When she told her father that she would not marry, he confined her in his mansion to prevent her from running away.

Wang felt God assure her that if she ran away, He'd help her. One night, she snuck out of the house and into the walled backyard garden. First, she took off her long skirt, threw it over the wall, and scaled the wall. Then she took a train to the home of her spiritual mentor, a missionary named Mrs. Sweet. When her father discovered she was missing, he guessed where she went and sent men to retrieve her. Wang's parents would not listen to her when she told them that God called her to evangelism. She locked herself in her room, fasted,

and prayed. Her parents feared that her hunger strike would end in suicide if they didn't allow her to go to seminary. So her father arranged for Wang's cousin to marry her fiancé instead. Wang enrolled in Jinling Theological College for Women in 1919.¹⁵

Upon finishing her education, Wang began her work as a traveling preacher. Several denominations invited her to hold services, and many people came to the Lord by her preaching, including a young man named Witness Lee. He later described how Wang led him to the Lord:

In April 1925 she was invited to my hometown of Chefoo to preach in the Southern Baptist auditorium. I heard the report and was intensely curious to witness such a young lady evangelist, twenty-five years old, preaching the gospel. We had never heard of such a thing before. Therefore, I attended her meeting, and I can testify that from that day to the present, I have never seen preaching that was so prevailing. She preached to a crowd of over one thousand, not about sin or about hell, but concerning how Satan possesses and occupies people. She used the story of Pharaoh possessing the children of Israel as the basis of her message. I was immediately caught by the Lord.¹⁶

In 1926, Wang planted a house church in Shanghai with her roommate from seminary, Ruth Lee, and male evangelist Watchman Nee. The group grew into the Little Flock Movement, led by Watchman Nee. Nee himself was initially converted through Dora Yu's preaching, but after he read John Nelson Darby's arguments against women's leadership, Nee decided that women should not teach men. He then convinced Ruth Lee and Peace Wang to stop teaching men.¹⁷ Thus, "after 1927, one observes a marked shift of gender selection in China's revival movement, which was taken over by a new generation of male evangelical revivalists such as Watchman Nee, Wang Mingdao, John Sung, and Leland Wang."¹⁸

8 Wu, 99.

9 Wu, "Dora Yu (1873-1931) Foremost Female Evangelist in Twentieth-century Chinese Revivalism," 93.

10 Wu, 85; Wu, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival in 20th Century China*, 142.

11 Wu, "Dora Yu (1873-1931)," 85.

12 Wu, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival*, 165.

13 Wu, 166.

14 Matt. 10:37.

15 Wu, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival in 20th Century China*, 167.

16 Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee—A Seer of Divine Revelation* (Living Stream Ministry), chapter 14, section 6 of 8. www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n

17 Wu, "Dora Yu (1873-1931)," 98.

18 Wu, 86.

Peace Wang and Ruth Lee continued to be very active in Christian mission after 1927, but figuring out how to follow the Spirit's leading became more complicated. They had to work within the constraints of what was then considered appropriate for women. One example of how Ruth Lee navigated faithfulness within this new constraint shows clearly in a letter she sent to Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. In the letter, Lee shared her ideas about how to address several issues in the churches she served. Instead of executing her plans, she labeled her concerns as matters that she wished "from now on the brothers would pay attention to."¹⁹ Lee portrayed herself as delivering the information to "the brothers" so that they could act as they saw fit. At the same time, she encouraged them to act in ways she thought were best.

Although Watchman Nee was against women teaching men, Lee's letter shows that women's roles may have been somewhat more flexible in practice. Throughout the letter, Lee emphasized the significant contributions that women made to their local churches. She insisted that the brothers not speak harshly of women leaders or blame them for church problems, especially if the men were neither willing nor spiritually mature enough to lead. She explained that women and men should work together to build up the Church in the unity and knowledge of Christ, though for the best results she recommended that men minister to men and women minister to women.²⁰

Ruth Lee's ministry resembled Phoebe's ministry in Romans 16. Just as Phoebe ministered to Roman Christians on Paul's behalf, Ruth Lee ministered to developing churches operating under Nee's teachings. While Watchman Nee conversed with leading international theologians and wrote spiritual treatises, Ruth Lee talked one-on-one with new believers and offered practical strategies for improving local church leadership. In the early 1940s, she and Peace Wang helped to stabilize Nee's Shanghai church after scandal forced him to step down.²¹

Yet these women are often overlooked. Most sources label them as the supporters of Watchman Nee's ministry. But looking at their stories and their influence, it seems these women had a ministry of their own. Had Peace Wang been a man, it's likely that Witness Lee would have called her his "mentor." Lee frequently sought her advice and intervention. However, because she was a woman, he said, "she always strongly *supported* me, and those with her always received her *help* and care."²² He says she "was an indescribable help to me in the ministry, so much so that a revival was brought in 1947" and "she played a crucial role under the Lord's leading." Clearly, Wang had significant ministry giftings, but Witness Lee used gendered language to describe those giftings: "Hundreds of believers, not only sisters but also brothers, received her *warm, brooding care*."²³ Several times, Lee described Wang as "strong," but never explicitly called her a "leader." This omission is significant because the way in which people are described impacts how the Church remembers them. Peace Wang and Ruth Lee are remembered as "helpers" who "assisted" the male leaders even though "co-workers" was the title that God apparently suggested to Nee in a dream he had prior to meeting Ruth Lee:

The night before her arrival, Watchman Nee was considering whether or not to join the reception, thinking that although she might be a good evangelist, since she was a female, she should not be too highly esteemed. However, during the night he had a dream. ... When he saw her in the dream, the Lord told him that she would be his co-worker.²⁴

The Chinese government arrested Ruth Lee and Peace Wang in 1956 for leading the Christian movement.²⁵ Both women died in prison. Along with Dora Yu, these women's influence on the spread of Christianity in China was immense. The stories of their impact need to be remembered and shared. 

19 Ruth Lee, "A letter from Sister Ruth Lee in her travels," in *The collected works of Watchman Nee*, ed. Watchman Nee (1993), 278.

20 Lee, 278.

21 Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee—A Seer of Divine Revelation* (Living Stream Ministry), chapter 14, section 8 of 8, www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n=http://bdconline.net/en/stories/nee-watchman

22 Lee, Watchman Nee, chapter 14, section 8 of 8. www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n, emphasis ours.

23 Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee*, chapter 14, section 7 of 8. www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n, emphasis ours.

24 Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee*, chapter 14, section 2 of 8, www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n.

25 Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee*, chapter 14, section 2 of 8, www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n.