

The Multiple Invisibilities of Witness Lee

—Paul H. B. Chang

In 1989, a Chinese-American minister named Witness Lee (Li Changshou) founded a school that is now one of the largest post-graduate theological institutions in the United States. The school currently enrolls well over three hundred full-time equivalents.¹ Bucking national trends, it shows healthy signs of growth, recently opening an extension campus in Boston to complement its main campus in Southern California. Furthermore, these North American campuses are only one national manifestation of a larger phenomenon. Internationally, there are about a dozen such schools representing every inhabited continent, all of which trace their founding to the same Chinese-American minister. The fact that this story is so little known, even among Asian-American theological educators, is the result of repeated attempts at erasure from multiple parties, including the founder himself. The reversal of these erasures is a difficult but rewarding task, one that reveals a fascinating, untold story about a major Asian-American theological figure.

Biography

Lee was born in 1905 in the Chinese province of Shandong. He came from a deeply Christian background, writing that “My mother’s maternal grandfather was a Southern Baptist, who in turn brought my mother into Christianity.” Although she was baptized in 1885, Lee concedes that he himself was only a nominal Christian, “Though I attended the Southern Baptist Church services and Sunday School in my youth, I was not saved and was never baptized by them.” Through the efforts of his sister, however, Lee was eventually baptized as a member of the Chinese Independent Church in 1925.²

In April of that same year, Lee heard the preaching of the itinerant evangelist Peace Wang (Wang Peizhen, 1899-1969). He later related that his actual conversion began from that day. As he walked home, her powerful speaking so affected him that he prayed “God I don’t like being usurped by Satan as Pharaoh, through the world as Egypt; I would like to serve You and preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus through the villages at any cost for my whole life.” Lee did not immediately begin full-time ministry. Instead, he spent some years with his local Brethren Assembly and eventually came into contact with the independent Chinese minister, Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972).³

Lee increasingly respected and identified with Nee’s teachings, and Lee became a recognized leader among Nee’s followers, especially in Northern China. During the 1930s, as Pentecostal revivals enflamed Shandong

1 Given the annual data tables of the Association of Theological Schools found at <http://www.ats.edu/resources/institutional-data/annual-data-tables>, Witness Lee’s “Full-Time Training in Anaheim” would be one of the 35 largest “graduate schools of theology” in the United States as of 2015.

2 Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), 283.

3 *Ibid.*, 284-85.



and its surrounding provinces, Lee helped to spread Nee's more reserved, sublime form of Christian mysticism and church practice. In the 1940s Lee even played a crucial role in restoring unity to Nee's home congregations in Southern China after a period of internal turmoil. By the time of the Communist victory on the mainland, Nee trusted Lee enough to send him to Taiwan to continue their work in the face of a potentially "desperate situation."⁴

Nee's fears were proven correct. He was soon arrested along with many other indigenous Christian leaders during the Communist Party's consolidation of power during the early 1950s. He would remain in prison until his death in 1972. Bereft of his spiritual mentor, Lee forged ahead. Once again he proved to be an exceptional religious leader, guiding the Taiwanese congregations through a period of rapid growth. Membership exploded from five hundred to more than twenty-five thousand in six years.⁵

In 1958, Lee visited the West for the first time and "stopped in America for a short while" as part of a longer trip to Europe. Initially, because of the distance, language, and cultural barriers, he did not entertain even the "slightest thought of going to the United States." Instead, he regarded Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia as more promising mission fields. After a few more visits, however, he "had a deeper impression" and decided to apply for a visa. In 1962, Lee immigrated and eventually became a naturalized American citizen.⁶

Shortly after Lee's arrival, tens of thousands of East Asian immigrants would follow him into the country under the changes in immigration policy made by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. They comprised a natural audience for Lee and his message, but Lee did not focus his efforts on them, writing that "I was very clear within that the Lord did not want me to work among the Chinese immigrants. Rather, He wanted me to bring His recovery to the typical Americans."⁷ Again, Lee succeeded impressively. Lee's message, derived from Nee's, criticized mainstream Christianity for its ritualism and formality. At the same time, in the context of the Cold War, Watchman Nee's imprisonment was something of a *cause célèbre* in the evangelical subculture. Lee thus appealed both to those who wanted to reform Christianity and to those who wanted it to shore up traditional American values. Lee attracted thousands of "typical Americans" to his meetings.

Eventually, Lee cemented a following among the Asian immigrants as well. In 1984, Lee lamented retrospectively that because he concentrated his efforts nearly exclusively on non-Asians in the early 1960s, "after six or seven years we lost from five hundred to one thousand saints [from among the Asian immigrants]." Still, "two years ago we began the Chinese-speaking work" and "the number of Chinese saints has become stabilized, and new ones are gradually being gained."⁸

Lee spent most of the rest of his long life in Southern California, publishing prolifically and overseeing the spread of local congregations. Under his guidance, new churches were established across the United States and throughout the world. By the time Lee died in 1997, his ideas were circulated and practiced in significant numbers in Africa, Asia, Europe, North and South America, and Oceania. Since his death, the growth of these congregations has continued at a rapid pace.

4 Ibid., 320.

5 Witness Lee, *Life-study of 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2001), 14-15.

6 Witness Lee, *Rising Up to Preach the Gospel* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2003), 21.

7 Ibid., 22. Lee never offered any reason besides "the Lord's speaking" for this, but given the existing popularity of his work in the Sinosphere, one might suspect that Lee's going to the United States was to open new and different doors to his ministry.

8 Ibid.



Promises and Problems of Institution and Tradition

The fact that Lee's work has survived his passing suggests the creation and maintenance of robust institutions and traditions. In his written works and oral preaching, however, Lee frequently disparaged both "institutions" and "traditions." Thus, although scholars of religion have frequently employed these terms in value-neutral or even positive ways, they must be applied to Lee and his followers with some care.

For instance, at one point, Lee argued that "Actually, according to God's New Testament economy, there should not be any organization in the church. The church is not an organization but an organism." He went on to explain his understanding of the difference between the two: "An organism is an entity entirely of life. Nothing in our body is produced by organization. In contrast, in an organization nothing is living; every piece is dead. Everything in an organization is a human work arranged by human hands."⁹

Similarly, Lee inveighed against tradition, even when depicted in the broadest sense. "Whether a person is sinful or not sinful, moral or immoral, that person is occupied by something other than Christ, by some element of the thousands of years of human history. We may call this the six-thousand-year human tradition." Lee continued by pointing out the source and outcome of this tradition, "Satan, the subtle one, is lurking behind the six-thousand-year human tradition. Due to his influence, we live in this tradition instead of in Christ."¹⁰ In contrast, Lee wrote "Nothing commanded by God could ever become a tradition, for God's word is always fresh. A tradition, on the contrary, is something invented or initiated by man."¹¹

Thus, it is clear that Lee's opposition to both institutions and traditions returns to the same point. Lee posits that both institutions and traditions are artificial constructs that deprive people of direct contact with Christ. God cannot be bound by hierarchies, organizational protocol, or even God's own history of action. Instead, God is "always fresh" and can directly inspire every member of the body of Christ in a living, unpredictable way.

The source of Lee's critiques is also easy to trace. Through Watchman Nee, Lee received a theological heritage that was heavily indebted to the Anglo-American holiness movements of the 19th century. These holiness teachers, like many Christians before them, attempted to reform or renew Christianity by infusing it with a fresh, living piety. In this way, they were very much of a piece with the Romantic temper of the times, prizing extemporaneity and naturalness.

Many of these same sources influenced early Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, and Lee's critiques of organization and tradition were reminiscent of voices in these contemporary movements. All these groups ostensibly eschewed established Christianity in the name of bringing ordinary Christians back into direct contact with the Holy Spirit. Of course, as they did so, they often formed durable and successful institutions of their own. Historian Grant Wacker has pithily encapsulated the complementary dynamism of this paradox.

Pentecostals' primitivist conviction that the Holy Spirit did everything, and that they themselves did nothing, bore grandly pragmatic results. It freed them from self-doubt, legitimated reasonable accommodations to modern culture, and released boundless energy for feats of worldly enterprise. At the same time, this vigorous engagement with everyday life stabilized the primitive and kept it from consuming itself in a fury of charismatic fire.¹²

9 Witness Lee, *Crucial Principles for the Christian Life and the Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2007), 72-73.

10 Witness Lee, *Life-study of Philippians* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2000), 166-67.

11 Witness Lee, *Life-study of Matthew* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1998), 534.

12 Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 14.



Lee's thought follows similar lines, with more emphasis on the spontaneous action of the divine life, and less emphasis on the "fury of charismatic fire." In any case, it seems that the lasting power of these institutions owes something to their inherent contradictions. Rather than threatening incoherence, the Holy Spirit's unpredictable leadership of pragmatic humans can both sanctify the institutions they create and serve as an endlessly renewable reserve for further reforms and adaptations.

Multiple Erasures

The similarities between Lee's experiences and those of the Pentecostals do not end with their paradoxical adeptness at building institutions even while denouncing them. It is helpful to consider Lee's relationships with other Christians as well. Like the early Pentecostals, Lee was frequently treated with deep suspicion by other American Christians. To some extent, this mistrust can be traced to the novelty of his message. Lee was willing to criticize popular Christian ideas and practices if he felt that they were not biblical. He also spoke of deification, a well-established, historical Christian doctrine that nevertheless sounded strange and unfamiliar to many American Protestants. Other tensions resulted simply from competition in the religious marketplace. Because of both the religious demographics of the United States and the nature of his message, Lee (like many religious leaders before him) found that many of his followers came from existing Christian denominations.

Unlike the American Pentecostals, however, Lee had to deal with the additional burden of being ethnically Chinese. During the 1960s and 1970s, American fears of cults and sects, especially from the East, were acute. The cover of one book published in that period used a terrifying illustration of Lee that depicted him with a sinister smile. The image reflected in his eyeglasses suggested his control over a wild mob of followers. Another book argued that Lee was one of "The Mindbenders."¹³ In recent years, some of Lee's most strident critics have recanted. Many of these critics were part of the evangelical "counter-cult" movement, and now admit that their work was based on an unfair double standard.¹⁴

Lee's Chinese heritage has become a liability in another sense. The Chinese government has never reconciled itself to Watchman Nee's legacy. Although some of the congregations that follow Nee have now been incorporated into the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the official Protestant church of the People's Republic of China, many others continue to operate in more liminal spaces.¹⁵ In China, Nee's name has never been cleared, and Lee's name and his followers are still tarnished by association. If the persecution of the Chinese government was something of an asset during the Cold War, in the context of China's growing international influence, it now carries dangerous associations.

Stigmatized in his adopted country and unwelcome in his country of origin, Witness Lee occupied a space that would be familiar to many other Asian-Americans. Powerful actors have repeatedly tried to occlude Lee's reputation and voice. If these external attempts at erasure were not enough, the interested scholar must also contend with Lee's complicated attempts at self-erasure.

13 Neil T. Duddy, *The God-Men: An Inquiry into Witness Lee and the Local Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981); Jack Sparks, *The Mindbenders: A Look at Current Cults* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1977).

14 *Christian Research Journal*, 32, no. 6 (2009). The entire issue is entitled "We Were Wrong" and is dedicated to extensively retracting and refuting many of its authors' own previous criticisms of Lee and his followers.

15 The underground/official church dichotomy is unhelpful and potentially misleading. For a better explanation of China's religious market see Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China," *The Sociological Quarterly*, 47 no. 1, (2006): 93-122.



In one of his visits to Asia, Lee had strong words for his fellow diasporic Chinese. He wrote:

We have a wide assortment of people in the church. There are Chinese, Japanese, Indonesians, Filipinos, and Malaysians. We also have some here from Singapore and Thailand. I would ask you, do you live by Christ or by the culture in which you have been raised? Many of you are overseas Chinese. Do you live by the Chinese culture, or by the culture of the country where you are? You may be a Chinese living by the Filipino culture, or by the Indonesian, Malaysian, or Thai cultures. Your overseas Chinese culture has been influenced by the native cultures. What you live by is this mixed culture, not by Christ.¹⁶

The convictions that encouraged Lee to reject institutions and traditions in favor of a direct dependence on Christ also indicted cultures and ethnic backgrounds of all kinds. Lee, of course, was intimately acquainted with the hybridity of overseas Chinese culture. Nevertheless, he rejected it in favor of a deeply otherworldly piety, one that followed the dictum in Colossians: “There cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all.”¹⁷

Thus, although Lee has been discussed here as Chinese, Asian, and American, he would reject all such categories as distractions from his true identity and his message. In another place, he foreclosed the possibility of retaining even the slightest hint of national origins, “In the church, there should not be the European, Asian, American, Mexican, Chinese, or any other flavor, but only the flavor of the Triune God expressed in His unique image.”¹⁸

Seeing the Unseen

American Christians, the Chinese government, and even Lee himself have all attempted at different times to erase different aspects of Lee’s identity, message, and accomplishments. Lee’s counter-cult detractors in the United States have categorized him as a dangerous foreigner, trying to corrupt American Christianity. In China itself, the government has persecuted and jailed Lee’s followers along with Nee’s. Lee himself might prefer that any appraisal of his life focuses narrowly on the truth of his teachings, as coming directly from the Holy Spirit.

Almost any evaluation of Lee’s life and work threatens to upset these complicated stakes. And yet, it is a project that is well worth the effort. Witness Lee and his teachings are not going away. Since his death, Lee’s followers have continued to propagate and practice his theology. They have now established local congregations in every state in the U.S., and may now have more active members than any other Christian group on the Taiwanese island. Lee and his teachings have raised up indigenous leaders and congregations in many different countries, making him rather unique in Chinese Christianity and even among Chinese religious leaders more generally. And finally, the institution referred to at the beginning of this essay, the Living Stream Bible Truth and Church Service Training, commonly known as the Full-Time Training in Anaheim (FTTA), is almost completely unknown, despite its remarkable success.

Every year, more than one hundred fifty students enroll in the FTFA. Chinese Americans are disproportionately represented, comprising a significant minority of each incoming class. As a whole, however, the rest of the student body is impressively diverse in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, and geographical origin. All of

16 Witness Lee, *Life Messages*, vol. 2 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992), 197-98.

17 Colossians 3:11, from Lee’s own *Recovery Version*.

18 Witness Lee, *God’s New Testament Economy* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1986), 871.



the students have already received their bachelor's degrees, many of them from America's top-tier research institutions. Most are American citizens. A few international students may also enroll, but only if they are proficient in English. Otherwise, they may be encouraged to attend one of the other international Full-Time Training Centers with courses offered in their native languages.

The vast majority of these so-called trainees will finish the entire two-year, full-time course of studies, which includes over two hours of classroom instruction every day, five days a week. Trainees have the option of taking New Testament Greek. Otherwise, the curriculum is almost entirely derived from Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's published works. The classes are thematically arranged, and, besides Greek, there are no electives. Thus, all students will take courses on "The Triune God," "The Body of Christ," and "The Experience of Christ as Life," among other offerings.

The classes are mostly taught by a faculty of "trainers," many of them chosen by Lee himself during his lifetime. Lee always prized a living piety over formal education, and the qualifications of the trainers reflect this preference. Most of them have graduate degrees, but only some are from fields that might be found in faculties at typical seminaries. Even those with seminary degrees or doctorates in church history and biblical languages rarely draw directly from their academic training when they teach. Instead, the focus of instruction is to help trainees come to understand the Bible as Nee and Lee themselves did.

Although lectures and studies are the focus of the FTTA, the scope of the training far exceeds the classroom. Trainees also perform menial services. For instance, they prepare and serve their own meals and clean the common areas of the campus, including bathrooms. They are subject to multiple roll calls every day, which are intended to teach them punctuality. Their living quarters are inspected weekly for violations like stray hairs and smudges. They also engage in ministry on college campuses, in the community, and with neighborhood children. In some ways, their work resembles the novitiate of a religious order more than a typical school.

And yet, after two years, most of them will eventually go on to secular jobs or other graduate programs. A minority will commit themselves to full-time ministry and some of these may enroll in a third year of studies focused on practical ministry at the newly opened extension campus in Boston. Even the full-time Christian workers will have no special status in the congregation. Lee rejected all ministerial titles and clerical systems. In the mind of the training graduates, every Christian should be a "full-time" servant of God. Whether or not they relinquish their jobs in the secular world is of secondary importance. Of much greater importance is the fact that every graduate of the training return to their local congregations. There, they seek to live out their training for the rest of their lives, in service to all the members of the body of Christ.

Conclusion

Every aspect of this training was originally designed by Lee himself, and both trainers and trainees consider themselves to still be participants in "Witness Lee's training." They are not wrong. Like Lee himself, the training stands out from its peers. Lee was American, Asian, Chinese, and none of the above. The training may be considered a bible school, seminary, boot camp, and community outreach center, and yet it is also different from all of these. Despite these idiosyncrasies, there are broader lessons to be learned.

Part of the success of the FTTA is due to its extensive integration into a larger network of churches. The FTTA publishes no advertisements and has no staff devoted to expanding its outreach or enrollment. Its growing student body is almost entirely a testament to the examples of its alumni in their home congregations. Most



trainees enter the training after being inspired by their interactions with training graduates. Training graduates thus produce more entering trainees, in a rapidly repeatable cycle.

In some ways, the success of the FTTA is also due to the fact that it is not meant to produce professional clergy. It may thus have broader appeal to those who do not feel a particular sense of religious vocation. This also means that trainees are usually not disappointed if they are unable to find a job in full-time ministry upon graduation. They are conditioned to look upon their time in the training as the beginning of a lifelong journey, and thus, a worthy experience in itself.

Both of these strengths point to a third important theme. The FTTA may succeed because of its conflicted relationship with its own institutional existence. Both its lack of much support staff and its detachment from professional clerical training point to the fact that the FTTA was founded, in part, to efface itself.¹⁹ Lee's goal was not to help the training become a successful or prosperous school. In fact, Lee urged trainees not to "preach, talk, advertise, or say anything about the training." Instead, they should disappear into the churches and focus on living out their training in an irreproachable manner, "a life of the gospel."²⁰ The paradox of the FTTA's health as an institution is that it is not designed to invest in its own institutional survival.²¹ This allows its stakeholders—faculty, staff, students, and alumni—to focus with great intensity on the message of Lee's ministry and on individual human relationships.

This essay has highlighted the FTTA as one aspect of Lee's legacy that might be of particular interest to Asian-American theological educators. Additionally, he left behind an immense oeuvre of tens of thousands of pages, a pattern of church leadership on multiple continents, and at least tens of thousands of followers around the globe. The effects of his life and work are only beginning to be explored.



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¹⁹ The FTTA not only lacks advertising and outreach staff, it also has no alumni relations or fundraising staff. Its employees are focused either on providing personal, pastoral care to the trainees or working with trainees to maintain the physical premises.

²⁰ Witness Lee, *Instructions and Exhortation to the Trainees* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), 44.

²¹ Lee's model for the FTTA was probably the multiple trainings of Watchman Nee, all of which were temporary.



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