

The Christian Gospel Mission (Providence) Church in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT: The article presents the birth and development of the Christian Gospel Mission (Providence Church) in Taiwan before, during, and after the detention of its founder, President Jung Myung-seok, between 2008 and 2018. The success of the movement in Taiwan, which was not stopped when the founder was sentenced for sexual abuse, is studied from three different angles: Providence's view of Taiwan and its subjectivity; the group's "feminist" theology and promotion to roles of leadership of women pastors; and how it reacted to COVID-19, making it difficult for anti-cult movements, both in South Korea and Taiwan, to apply to the church the theory that "cults" are "plague-spreaders" successfully used to scapegoat Shincheonji and others.

KEYWORDS: Christian Gospel Mission, Providence Church, Jung Myung-seok, Providence Church in Taiwan, New Religious Movements in Taiwan, New Religious Movements and COVID-19.

Introduction: Taiwan's History and the Pursuit of Subjectivity

This article discusses the presence of Providence Church, also known as the Christian Gospel Mission, in Taiwan, through three different windows: Providence's view of Taiwan's subjectivity, its "feminist" theology and promotion of women pastors to leadership roles, and its reaction to COVID-19. Both authors have studied Providence's presence in Taiwan as part of their academic research activity. However, theirs is an emic-etic approach to the subject, as they are also members of Providence. We are aware that much of the literature about

Providence has been dominated by the court case in which its founder, Jung Myung-seok, normally referred to as President Jung by his followers, has been sentenced in 2008 in South Korea to a jail term of ten years for sexual abuse. While it would be impossible not to mention the repercussions this decision had in Taiwan as well, it is not our purpose here to discuss President Jung's court case. However, we will make some comparisons between the situation of Providence in Taiwan and South Korea.

Benedict Anderson (1936–2015), a scholar of nationalism who is mostly renowned for his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Anderson 1983), depicts a prototype of anti-colonialist nationalism rising in the early stage of globalization in his book *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Anderson 2005). This receptive nationalism, conceived facing imperialism and colonialism, appears keenly aware of the contemporary world, values global interconnections, and echoes internationalism. This revolutionary vision reverses the impression and refutes the accusation that nationalism is intrinsically inward-looking and exclusionary. In the era of globalization, countries at the periphery reached out to the world by taking advantage of the paths that the empires had created.

Wu Rwei-ren, a well-known Taiwanese scholar, discusses how Taiwan and Hong Kong confront the growing threat posed by China today:

In the late globalization era, we had no choice but to suffer the fate of drifting from different colonizing powers and consecutive colonial occupations. However, the global network became so interwoven that we could acquire vast knowledge of the world, make countless friends all over the world, and build strong international connections. Today, we have reached the level of internationalization that far exceeds that of [José] Rizal [1861–1896, well-traveled Philippine writer and nationalist martyr] more than a century ago. In the late globalization era, every Taiwanese, every Hongkonger could be a Rizal who traveled around the world. If one Rizal is able to push open the door to the imagined nationality, what will thousands of millions of Rizal achieve? An empire is strong but fragile because it circles itself on the continent. But islands encircle the world (Wu 2019).

In certain historical circumstances, globalization and nationalism can be complementary rather than opposing each other. With its rich cultural and historical background, Taiwan in particular has such diversity and inclusiveness. Taiwan has experienced consecutive cultural oppressions under foreign control. Taiwan was under the rule of the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1912)

dynasties of China. After fifty years of Japanese colonial rule (1895–1945), the Republic of China (ROC) government began exercising jurisdiction over Taiwan.

To suppress the Taiwanese cultural identity, the Japanese regime labeled the Taiwanese as *Chankoro* (“slaves of the Qing”). The Japanese colonizers humiliated the Taiwanese by degrading their predominant Chinese identity. This representative example illustrates how the name-calling practice left an imprint on the historical memory for most Taiwanese intellectuals under the Japanese colonial rule. Being subjected to such humiliation and unfair treatment, many Taiwanese intellectuals were determined to fight against the Japanese colonialism.

Wu Zhuo-liu (1900–1976), hailed as “the poet of iron and blood,” was an influential Taiwanese poet and novelist after World War II. He founded the magazine *Taiwan Literature and Art* and the Wu Zhuo-liu Literary Prize in his later years. In his autobiography *The Fig Tree*, Wu wrote:

Look, our nation, our people have been crushed beneath the iron heel of you Japanese for fifty years, yet the Taiwanese have never yielded and have gone on resisting at the spiritual level. In school, on the sports field, in every kind of office or organization, we have competed against you and striven not to lose to you. You Japanese have constantly proclaimed your superiority, conceitedly assuming you were far better than us, but we Taiwanese consider ourselves to be Han Chinese and as such culturally more advanced than you. Subconsciously we Taiwanese have been engaged in a contest of spiritual strength; for the last fifty years we have competed against you for the moral high ground (Wu 2002, 95).

A proof of this is the fact that Taiwan conceded nothing to Japan as far as respect for the law was concerned. Taiwanese believed that their social behavior, with emphasis on such values such as refusing to lie and keeping one’s bond, had attained higher standards than that of the Japanese. Humiliations stimulated Taiwanese national consciousness. To fight against the Japanese colonial rule, besides participating in armed uprisings in the early years of the Japanese administration, the Taiwanese adopted an approach emphasizing Han Chinese ethnicity and protecting the Han Chinese culture.

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) states that, “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember” (Halbwachs 1950, 48). An interesting echo is found in Huang Chun-chieh’s analysis of the

“motherland consciousness”—a type of collective memory that dwells in the spiritual world of Taiwanese intellectuals (Huang 2006, 96–7). “Motherland” is the collective, historical burden that stemmed from the recognition for the Han Chinese culture. Moreover, the motherland consciousness was constructed and shaped by the contemporary society, especially under Japanese colonial rule and oppression.

During the period of Japanese occupation, Taiwanese intellectuals looked at the motherland’s history and culture as the collective memory shared by the Taiwanese community. This collective memory further became a part of their cultural identity. Among all factors that might have sparked the motherland consciousness among the Taiwanese, the power structure of politics played the most prominent role. The unbalanced power structure forced the Taiwanese to rapidly develop their motherland consciousness. However, after Japan’s defeat in World War II, the corruption and discrimination pervading the ROC government altered and smothered the motherland consciousness of the Taiwanese (Huang 2006).

After the ROC government took over Taiwan, the 228 Incident, i.e., the massacre of tens of thousands of protesters on February 28, 1947, marked the beginning of the White Terror period. Indeed, the ROC government has achieved modernization, industrialization, and rapid economic growth, but the negative impact of the authoritarian regime can be regarded as a “re-colonization after the colonization.” Chen Tsui-lien (2002) argued that the Chinese who relocated to Taiwan had already formed mistaken impressions of local Taiwanese (for example, of the Taiwanese *Rōnin* [vagrants]) for a long time, because of the Japanese political manipulation.

The Cairo Conference of 1943 stipulated that Japan should return Taiwan to the ROC. While the ROC government was preparing to take over Taiwan, there was significant discussion about the governance of the island. Some believed that the Taiwanese had to be reeducated and mentally sanitized for a period of time before obtaining full freedom, because the Taiwanese had been poisoned by the “enslaving colonial education.” Some suggested that “the entire motherland should treat the Taiwanese like an old student who had studied abroad for fifty years,” and warned that “instead of celebrating Taiwan’s restoration, China would end up colonizing Taiwan if the Chinese saw and treated the Taiwanese like the way the Japanese did.” The Taiwanese in Chongqing pinned all their

hopes on the ROC government's "trust, love, and respect for the Taiwanese," asking the Chinese "not to discriminate against local Taiwanese." With hindsight, those opinions were not taken seriously and did not eliminate the prejudice about "the enslaved Taiwanese" (Chen 2002, 148–49). This preconceived bias was blatantly held by Chen Yi (1883–1950), who was the chief executive and the postwar governor of Taiwan.

Motherland governors not only continued the ruling power style of the foreign colonizers, but also claimed their cultural superiority over the colonized local culture in Taiwan. Proponents of such idea alleged that the Taiwanese had been poisoned and polluted by the Japanese colonial mentality. From their point of view, the Taiwanese were enslaved, narrow-minded, and incapable of self-rule. To eradicate the deep-rooted Japanization and slave mentality, the Taiwanese must be re-Sinicized. Re-Sinicization propagated the preeminence of the Chinese culture and the progressiveness of the "Three Principles of the People." Moreover, Chinese political upstarts imported Chinese traditions and cultures. They imposed on the Taiwanese the New Life Movement, a government-led program that had failed to become widespread in China.

The ROC mentality bore remarkable resemblance to that of the Japanese empire. The only difference was that the political power was transferred from Yamato to Chinese people (Chen 2002, 162–63). The Japanese conquerors thought of the Taiwanese as *Chankoro* from *Shina*, and the ROC government that relocated to Taiwan in 1945 again labeled the Taiwanese as the Japanese's slaves.

In the debate over the issues of Taiwan's enslavement, both supporters and opponents were inclined to homogenize differences. However, Taiwanese intellectuals were acutely aware and capable of independent thinking. They gained an insight into the culture of Taiwan, which was no longer limited to either the Han or the Japanese culture under Japan's fifty-year rule. Taiwanese intellectuals neither blindly worshipped the Han culture, nor felt ashamed of having been colonized in the past. They believed that the culture of Taiwan could thrive by re-evaluating the Japanese colonial legacy along with learning from China and other countries. Furthermore, they outlined Taiwan's status in a world of cultural globalization, setting a collective goal of modernization and democratization for the Taiwanese society.

It is the power of self-awareness and self-determination that has driven the progress towards the development of decolonization. Looking back at the

postwar history, we can understand that Taiwanese ideologies changed, but the people's struggle for autonomy continued (Chen 2002, 189). Even though the Taiwanese were persecuted during the White Terror era and silenced during the martial law period, which lasted for 38 years and 56 days, from May 19, 1949, to July 15, 1987 (Dong 2011), the pursuit of subjectivity still stayed in the mainstream of the intellectual community. After suffering from oppression at the hands of the Japanese colonialism and tragedies like the 228 Incident under the ROC's military administration, Taiwanese intellectuals aspired to a greater degree of subjectivity. They were eager to build their national identity and increase their civic pride. Wu Chan-liang, a professor of the Department of History at National Taiwan University, once said:

National identity and national dignity are what the Taiwanese truly strive for. It is a consequence of suppressing the self for centuries. Anything that enhances the national identity and the sense of dignity will be admired, otherwise fiercely resisted. Since the rise of the Tangwai ["outside the Party"] movement, the core and the most emotional appeal behind all protests has been to help the Taiwanese achieve self-identity and self-respect (Wu 2012).

Historical memories of oppression and humiliation motivated the Taiwanese to pursue their national identity and dignity. It has become the most important course of thought in the development of Taiwanese philosophy. In pursuit of Taiwan's identity, Christianity played an essential role. In particular, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) had a strong presence in the advocacy of Taiwan's subjectivity.

Christianity in Taiwan and the Pursuit of Taiwan's Subjectivity

Amid the rising tension between Taiwan and China, the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) issued a public statement on August 16, 1977, asking the ROC government to "take effective measures whereby Taiwan may become a new and independent country." The PCT was the first organization that publicly called for Taiwan's independence.

Our church confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord of all mankind [sic] and believes that human rights and a land in which each one of us has a stake are gifts bestowed by God. Therefore, we make the declaration, set in the context of the present crisis threatening the 17 million people of Taiwan... As we face the possibility of an invasion by the Communist China, we hold firmly to our faith and to the principles underlying the

United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. We insist that the future of Taiwan be determined by the 17 million people who live there. We appeal to the countries concerned—especially to the people and the government of the United States of America—and to Christian churches throughout the world to take effective steps to support our cause.

In order to achieve our goal of independence and freedom for the people of Taiwan in this critical international situation, we urge our government to face reality and to take effective measures whereby Taiwan may become a new and independent country.

We beseech God that Taiwan and all the rest of the world may become a place where “Mercy and truth will meet together; righteousness and peace will embrace. Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven” (Psalm 85:10, 11) [TEV and KJV]. SIGNED BY: H.E. Chao, Moderator of the General Assembly; H.K. Weng, Deputy Moderator of the General Assembly (Acting in the absence of the Moderator); C.M. Kao, General Secretary (Chao, Weng, and Kao 1977).

The Kuomintang (KMT)-led government did not like that the PCT supported the groups promoting Taiwan’s independence. In addition to spying on church members, the KMT government infiltrated, subverted, and split the Presbyterian churches. The KMT state apparatus sought all means to tarnish the reputation of the PCT. When the Formosa Incident, i.e. the repression of pro-democracy demonstrations in Kaohsiung, took place in 1979, the PCT general secretary Kao Chun-ming (1929–2019) was arrested for having hidden one of the leaders of the protest, Shih Ming-teh (1941–), and was jailed for four years (from 1980 to 1984). Kao’s sentence was a representative case of the imprisonment of clergy in Taiwan’s history.

While intellectual elites were walking on the way of pursuing Taiwan’s subjectivity, church ministers took actions to support the activists of the Tangwai movement, who were fighting for multi-party democracy. In addition, Christianity placed a high value on human rights, which struck a chord with Taiwanese intellectuals, and chimed in with the mood of the nation. All these were favorable factors for the Christian evangelization of Taiwan. The development of Christian new religious movements in Taiwan, including Providence, can also be understood in a similar way.

Along with the globalization starting in the 1980s, the wave of decolonization swept over Taiwan. Unrelenting student movements and political activities highlighted the protest against China’s oppression, the restoration of Taiwan’s identity, and even the pursuit of Taiwan’s independence. The wider society

encouraged the liberation of personality, which turned Taiwan into the most tolerant and inclusive country in East Asia.

Providence Church Introduced from South Korea to Taiwan

In 1987, Providence Church, which Jung Myung-seok had established in South Korea, was introduced to Taiwan. Ever since Jung got acquainted with Taiwanese intellectuals, he publicly called Taiwan “a country” in front of all Providence members, outsiders, or public figures, and praised Taiwan highly among all Providence churches in the world. Jung often refers to Taiwan as “a great nation,” a contrasting view to what most people think of Taiwan (Jung 1995). He firmly believes that Taiwan is one of the three most important countries in the development of Providence’s history. Not only did he recognize Taiwan’s importance in the world, but also asked Providence members worldwide to pray together with him for Taiwan, especially for the situation of rising tension between Taiwan and China (Jung 1995). Jung fully understood that Taiwan had been excluded from many intergovernmental organizations, such as the United Nations, due to the political pressure from China. However, he often stated that “Before God, Taiwan is already an independent country” (Jung 1995).

On July 15, 1987, the ROC government officially announced the lifting of the martial law, ending the period of political suppression that had lasted for 38 years and 56 days. On December 1, 1987, the Government Information Office proclaimed that the lifting of press restrictions should be implemented on January 1, 1988. On November 5, 1987, the Executive Yuan approved the Statute on the Organization of Civil Associations, signifying that laws on civil associations should be applied to political parties. More than twenty new political parties were founded. On January 20, 1989, the Legislative Yuan passed the three readings of the Civil Associations Act for the Period of Communist Rebellion. Since then, citizens have been allowed to establish parties or organizations, enjoy the freedom of assembly and demonstration, and participate in political activities in accordance with the law (Chiu 2001). The above-mentioned changes in policy and law-making contributed to the lifting of party ban and press ban in Taiwan. However, Article 100 of the Criminal Code was not amended until May 15, 1992. The provision reads as follows:

Any person by violence or threats committing an overt act with intent to destroy the organization of the State, seize State territory, or using illegal means, change the Constitution or overthrow the Government shall be sentenced to imprisonment for not less than seven years; the ringleader shall be sentenced to life imprisonment.

The amendment of Article 100 of the Criminal Code marked an important step in the progress of democratization because it ensured that people would not be imprisoned for their peaceful advocacy of Taiwan independence. Decades of democratic movements have pushed open the door to freedom of speech and the protection of human rights. After the lifting of martial law, the Taiwanese society entered a crucial stage, in which younger generations identified with Taiwan's subjectivity and were eager to separate themselves from Chinese nationalism. To defend the right to advocate Taiwan independence in public, some protesters even committed the act of self-immolation.

Providence was introduced to Taiwan precisely at the peak of democratization and upon the lifting of martial law in 1987. In the early phase of its evangelization, quite a few members of the intellectual elite who later became key leaders in the church actually took part in the Tangwai movement.

In 1989, Jhou Syuan-shih and Lin Huei-chuan, who would be ordained as pastors after a few years, became two of the very first Providence members in Taiwan. Pastor Jhou graduated from the Department of Law at National Taiwan University and worked as a legislative assistant to Chen Shui-bian (the first president from the Democratic Progressive Party). Meanwhile, Pastor Lin graduated from National Tsing Hua University and served as a legislative assistant to Wu Shu-chen (who is Chen Shui-bian's wife and a wheelchair user). Both Pastor Jhou and Pastor Lin used to be active in the Tangwai movement and believed that they could change Taiwan by entering politics. However, they later decided to change the society through more spiritual means.

They remembered that President Jung had been always thinking highly of Taiwan and appreciating these young people's goals to reform the society. After listening to Jung, the two young Taiwanese put their trust in faith instead of pursuing a political career. Pastor Jhou recalled:

On the frontlines before and after the lifting of martial law, it couldn't be more natural for students to be concerned with Taiwan. With more and more people calling for reform, law and political science became mainstream academic disciplines. However, I realized that power often went hand in hand with personal desires. Distortions seemed to be inevitable. Once incentives were undermined or distorted, all efforts would be in vain. I

started as a legislative assistant after completing my military service. I devoted myself entirely to elections. I went out to work early in the morning and return home late. Within one month, I started from scratch and teamed up twenty political clubs in different cities to support the candidate that I worked for. When I went back to Taipei, I saw the overhead door was locked and a person in charge of general affairs was resting. I helped re-establish the campaign headquarters in Taipei, which used to be large yet empty. Finally, the candidate won the legislative election! After I engaged in all these political activities, I came to realize that the key to a successful reform lies in “the change of life.” If we couldn’t improve ourselves, all reforms would end up being manipulated by personal desires. No matter how successful the rising stars of politics might be, they would be criticized and become the target of reform eventually. Distortions and deteriorations intoxicate reformers! Real reforms start from the reform of the heart. This country should embrace Christian love with open arms (personal interview, 2020).

Pastor Lin recalled how he got interested in Providence:

Mr. Huang Ching-yuan, who was the legislative assistant to Ms. Wu Shu-chen, made a good impression on me. He was immaculately dressed in suit and tie. The first thing he did right after he came to work was sweep the office floor. What he did impressed me. As soon as I learned that he was a Christian and a graduate student in philosophy at National Taiwan University, I wanted to ask him a few questions about life.

A couple of days before the Election Day, the candidate was on the brink of winning. People at the campaign headquarters were stressed and worried. Mr. Huang asked Mr. Chen (Shui-bian), “May I ask some church members to come visit and pray for us?” Of course! The atmosphere was no longer stifling after sisters in the church came at that evening. We had a good conversation. Surprisingly, when they prayed for us, the atmosphere was lightened and peace was in the air. I started to participate in the Bible studies during the Wild Lily Student Movement in March 1990. I realized that Taiwan could be saved only if there were enough righteous people. I agreed that political reforms could change the society dramatically. However, if we want to change ourselves completely, we need faith. I learned from my experience—if I do not improve my personality, I just make an external improvement. The core of self-improvement is to improve our thoughts. That’s why I chose the path of faith over the path of politics (personal interview, 2020).

Baptized during the early stage of Providence development in Taiwan, Pastor Jhou and Pastor Lin used to devote themselves to the political ideal of Taiwan independence. However, after they listened to Jung’s teaching on Christian beliefs and faith, they realized that renewing the mind of people is far more important than carrying out a political reform. Thus, they did not continue their career in politics. Instead, they kept exploring and promoting those Taiwanese values that they found in the world of faith. In addition to the pastors’ individual

political backgrounds, a decisive factor that motivated them to walk on a religious path was Jung's appreciation for Taiwan. Jung has been always showing considerable respect for Taiwan's subjectivity. Pastor Lin recalled:

In September 1991, while visiting the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall, Teacher [Jung] mentioned that God pitied Taiwan, so the nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-shek [1887–1975] relocated from China to Taiwan, which was similar to how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. In an interview with [Japanese novelist] Shiba Ryōtarō [1923–1996] in April 1994, President Lee Teng-hui [1923–2020] also compared himself to Moses—the leader who was blessed by God and freed the Israelites from coercion. In December 1995, Mr. Jung Myung-seok said that, although China has missiles, God will protect Taiwan (personal interview, 2020).

Throughout history, many ethnic groups and theologians have been applying the biblical story of the Promised Land to illustrate the establishment of new countries and the discovery of continents. Jung also used this biblical reference—leaving Egypt and entering Canaan—to depict how Taiwan became independent from China and turned into the Promised Land of faith for the ethnic Chinese. As a foreigner and a friend of Taiwan, Jung expressed the hope that from the perspective of faith, he could help cultivate young Taiwanese elites, especially those who walk the path of spiritual reformation instead of entering politics.

Pastor Jhou recalled that when he went to South Korea for the first time in 1990, he visited the National Assembly and had in-depth exchanges with elites studying at prestigious colleges. At the end of the journey, Jung said in front of members, “Today, Taiwanese elites are also working very hard to learn for their people” (personal interview, 2020). These words remained engraved in Pastor Jhou's heart. These Taiwanese intellectuals who later became pastors introduced Jung to some leading figures of Taiwan's democracy movement, including Chen Shui-bian, whose success in the presidential election marked the very first party alternation in Taiwan's history.

Providence Church and Taiwan's Subjectivity

Since 1999, Providence has been at the receiving end of considerable media criticism in South Korea. Meanwhile, Jung started proselyting overseas, and left South Korea to visit Taiwan and other countries. Jung also held an international soccer tournament promoting world peace in Taipei. He invited Chen Shui-bian, the newly elected president of Taiwan, to attend the tournament. During his stay

in Taiwan, Jung met Shih Ming-teh, the former chairperson of the Democratic Progressive Party who had been imprisoned for more than 25 years because of his participation in Taiwan's independence movement. They discussed Christian ideas about love for enemies. In addition, by visiting many historical sites, Jung got a better understanding of Taiwan. He recognized that Taiwan was a model of democracy and proclaimed it the firstborn son of faith in the ethnic Chinese society. Either in interpersonal relationships or in spoken discourse, Jung continued to show his support and respect for Taiwanese intellectuals' pursuit of Taiwan's subjectivity.

In May 2007, Jung was incarcerated in China. After ten months in prison, he was extradited to South Korea, where he was sentenced to a ten-year imprisonment. During these ten years, although Jung could not attend church activities in person, he still wrote letters to emphasize Taiwan's values and status in Providence:

When there are "two olive trees, two witnesses" and "the Original Entity," he wrote, they can become one and the history can develop. Japan, like "a female," is good at managing the world of internal functions. Taiwan, like "a male," is good at managing the world of external functions. Just like "the more spiritual one" and "the more physical one" become one and work together, "Japan" and "Taiwan" become two witnesses and push the history with the Original Entity. "Japan" and "Taiwan" are the two countries that other countries cannot catch up with. There are young people pushing the history in these two countries. There will be 10,000 people in a short period of time (Jung 2018c).

Serving as a deputy to Jung while he was in jail, the Revival Speaker Pastor Jung Joeun hosted evangelism activities and events around the world. She continued Jung's work and recognized Taiwan's sovereignty and efforts in Providence:

The Lord spoke through Teacher [Jung]: Taiwan has a great national character—decisiveness. Let's run for the Providence history proactively! Let's do it proactively! Do not envy those big countries in the world. You should run for the history proactively!... You are indeed the best in the world.

From the perspective of the people, Taiwan has been independent from that big country, has it not? Since Taiwan freed itself from that country, Taiwan has been facing unfair treatment and oppression. It is very difficult for many countries to apply for a visa to that country. However, Taiwan is one of the three pillars in Providence. One of the three pillars! Taiwan is one of the three leading countries. In Providence, everyone acknowledges Taiwan. Before God, they will all recognize Taiwan... In the Kingdom of Heaven, for God and for Teacher, Taiwan is one of the three countries on which Teacher really focuses (Jung J. 2013).

Taiwan is small in size, but it is not a small country. Perhaps some become disappointed at the country's situations. However, if you can overcome this disappointment through faith, your dreams and expectations will be fulfilled.

Except Providence, not a single organization in the world will cherish Taiwan like this. Before Heaven and earth, only the Holy Trinity and the Lord treasure and cherish Taiwan so much. South Korea has the first place, and the second belongs to Taiwan. This is predestined. You can make it because you have the character to succeed (Jung J. 2016).

Following the directions given by President Jung, the South Korean pastors of Providence fully understand that Taiwan has been facing diplomatic pressure from Mainland China on all kinds of international occasions. On the contrary, in international activities and joint gatherings of Providence, Taiwan is treated with the utmost respect. This really touches the heart of Taiwanese intellectuals who pursue the restoration of subjectivity. In an international gathering, which was centered in Taiwan yet open to other overseas countries online, "Tears of Formosa" was chosen to be the theme song. The song illustrates the retrospect and prospect of Taiwan's history:

In 1949, the Nationalist government relocated to Taiwan.

In 1971, the United Nation expelled Taiwan.

Diplomatic allies became China-friendly, cutting ties and turning against me. All happened in a row.

They call me Chinese Taipei.

Kind, enthusiastic, people of hospitality.

Putting our hands together, we pray, labor, and remain pious.

It's time. It's fate. It's destiny.

Let the incense of prayers ascend to Heaven.

Let the sudden and drastic changes come to an end.

With all my heart, I pray to Heaven.

Peace is my deepest wish.

Pity me, I ask for nothing else.

Free me from changes and upheavals (Chang 2015).

With the choice of this theme song, Providence showed its respect for Taiwan's history and cultures, and reflected its understanding of Taiwanese emotions. Within thirty years from the first activities in the island, the management positions for the Providence clergy in Taiwan became entirely localized.

Ten years after being convicted, Jung was freed from prison on February 18, 2018. Having been in jail himself, Jung empathizes with inmates and stands up against judicial mistakes and for the humane treatment of prisoners, themes that have attracted great interest in Taiwan. Not unexpectedly, Jung presents the theme in his own theological terms:

In China, Teacher [Jung] suffered because of those who were controlled by Satan. Besides Teacher, several people were incarcerated at that time. A passage in the Bible states, “You will suffer persecution for ten days.” “One day” was extended to be “one month”—in such a way God calculates time. We had been suffering for ten months and later were released. We endured great torment and agony. “Ten months” were like “ten years.”

Half piece of steamed corn bread was provided at each meal. At first I thought, “I like this kind of corn bread. Corn is good for health. Thank goodness!” However, after a few weeks, I felt tired of eating corn bread. The soup was cooked by putting sliced cabbages into iced water and then adding some soybean oil to it. I had severe diarrhea afterwards, so I washed away the soybean oil before eating the soup. When I stayed there, a lot of things happened. I remembered one incident in particular. Sometimes, soup with some meat was provided. One day, one staff member tried to scoop some pieces of meat from the soup barrel for me. She scooped again and again. Finally, some pieces of meat came to the surface of the soup. She scooped up the meat pieces right away and put them into bowl. I saw this and prayed to the Holy Son, saying “Your love is extreme.” The Holy Son replied, “I tell you because you see all of this. I scooped for so many times, but there was barely any meat. I really want to give you one more piece of meat, but there were only tiny minces. Eventually, I still found one piece of meat for you.” I never forget that. I always keep that in mind, so I can share the story with you (Jung 2018d).

Somebody was walking on a street, and he saw that a person was knocked out by a bully. That man ran over there to stop the bully, but he was also stabbed and knocked out by the bully. Both the man and the person who was first injured got arrested by the police. The judge said, “This man hit the person who was first injured. During the fight, he was stabbed and then he stabbed the other. Two knives were found on the spot. These two people were fighting each other!” In fact, the bully stabbed these two people, left the two knives on the spot and fled. The judge failed to find out the truth because the eyes of his body, the eyes of his brain, the eyes of his mind, and the eyes of his judgment were blind and rotting! (Jung 2013b).

If God wants to help “someone who is imprisoned,” He can only use the things at that place to help that person. The situation will be worse than that of “someone who is neither imprisoned nor helped.” After all, God can only select the clothes among all the clothes at that place if He wants to give some clothes to that person. God can only give the person a bit more of the food among all the food at that place. Thus, the situation will be still worse than that of “someone who is neither imprisoned nor helped.” This is how

God helps people. However, people said, “What did God do for me? Nobody helped me. I did it all on my own” (Jung 2018b).

Based on his own experience, Mr. Jung Myung-seok advocates prisoner rights and speaks out against injustices in the judicial system. He asks members to pray with him for the protection of human rights in prison. Subsequently, prison conditions and regulations in South Korea improved. For example, a separate toilet cubicle is now provided in the cell; officers are required to adopt a less hostile attitude towards prisoners; the release time is changed to 4 a.m. for those who have completed their sentences; the quality of meals served to prisoners is improved. Jung repeatedly emphasized that God does His best work even in impossible situations, so people should give thanks to God (Jung 2020a).

Reflecting on his experience in China, where he was first jailed, Jung also comments on democracy, another theme of obvious interest in Taiwan:

Leaders and directors on Earth shouldn't be dictatorial because the kingdom of God has come upon us. We should walk with God together! (Jung 2020b).

Today's world is different from the past. Now is the era of integrity, democracy, and freedom. It's the time that people are allowed to speak up, so you shouldn't say whatever you want or feel without thinking twice. This is not going to work. This is not going to work. If you do so, people will rise to resist. Despite being a leader, an arrogant person will not be liked by his people. He looks so arrogant wherever he goes. “Teacher, why do you act like this?” You're all going to say that (Jung 2020b).

The same situation also applies to politicians. If a politician imposes his will on his people and educates them according to his own mentality, this is not the right thing to do. God will strike this kind of people. Communists in the past educated and brainwashed their people according to their own mentality. They eventually came to a dead end. God lets us realize this (Jung 2020b).

Influenced by these teachings, Providence members in Taiwan take actions to advocate universal values, such as human rights, opposition to dictatorship, and democracy. For three years in a row since 2016, a Providence member who served as the president of the NTU Graduate Student Association has invited the theater troupe led by Baba Sakura, a famous Japanese playwright, to present the stage play *71 Days for the White Taiwanese Lily*. The performance was held at NTU to commemorate Freedom of Expression Day and to remember the spirit of sacrifice of Cheng Nan-Jung (1947–1989), the activist who set himself on fire for democracy. It reminded the younger generation of Taiwan that the path to today's democracy was long and steep.

Female Presence in the Providence Church in Taiwan

In the second part of this paper, we present some reflections on the presence of a majority of women in Taiwan's Providence Church, preceded by some theoretical premises.

Rodney Stark, a well-known American sociologist of religion, pointed out that early Christianity was able to attract many female followers because Christian communities at that time treated women better than their pagan or Jewish counterparts. In early Christian communities, women took positions of honor and authority. A great number of early Christian women transcended traditional gendered roles (Stark 2011). In this way, as a new religious movement, Christianity had better gender equality practices, and many female followers were attracted to the new religion. Like Stark, Karen Armstrong turns the traditional patriarchic portrait of Paul the Apostle (ca. 5–64 CE) on its head to show that the early church did not immediately repress the autonomy of women (Armstrong 2015). Ting Jen-chieh's research shows that in traditional Chinese patriarchal societies, women often pursue autonomy by choosing to participate in religion (Ting 2020). This occurs not only through mainstream religion, but also through new religious movements. Both the theology of Providence and its development in Taiwan demonstrate a "feminist" theology in action.

To understand the background of this topic, we need to present a brief overview of Taiwan's and Korea's women's rights movements. Taiwan, as a member of the East Asian Confucian cultural circle, has embraced a kind of filial piety that serves the interests of men. Traditional norms of gender relations in Taiwan often involve a certain violence over women to show the dominance of the patriarchal society, causing women to often self-silence themselves and exhaust their will power, such that they "lose themselves" or feel displaced. Since the 1980s and the end of martial law, the women of Taiwan started pursuing their autonomy based on their cultural, physiological, and psychological needs. In Taiwan, the development of women's rights movement has its own specific historical context, and it inevitably became one of the most important social movements in Taiwan (Chiu 2010; Ku 2020, 10).

In South Korea, which shares with Taiwan deep cultural roots in Confucianism, there also exist efforts to protect women's rights (Cui 2008). The 2019 movie *Kim Ji-young: Born in 1982*, adapted from a novel of the same name,

has a protagonist who lives in contemporary South Korea. Her rather common name alludes to the entire female population in the country. The movie portrays the protagonist's mental state and the difficulties she encounters, criticizing the oppressing ideals of the East Asian family that requires women to sacrifice their own ideals for men's success (Chen 2020). Reception for a reflective movie like this should have been favorable, and South Korean society should have re-examined how it treated women (including in its movies: Dong 2019). However, when the movie was shown in the theaters, it generated various controversial incidents, even lethal attacks.

In 2016, about the time the novel was first published, there was the Gangnam random killing incident. The murderer claimed to be a misogynist. In 2018, during a fan-meeting event, Irene (Bae Joo-hyun), the leader of the South Korean musical girl group Red Velvet, said she read *Kim Ji-young: Born in 1982*, which prompted some fans to protest by shredding or burning her posters. When the movie producers first announced its casts, social media accounts of the main actress Jung Yu-mi were flooded by toxic comments, such as "Why would you ever participate in a feminist movie? We will cancel you to no end." In addition, even before the movie was shown, it was bombarded with negative reviews, and the actresses involved were personally attacked (Wang 2019). From these incidents, we can see how difficult it is to fight for women's rights in South Korea. Nevertheless, in Taiwan as well as South Korea, the fight for women's rights kept growing. Religion also had a role to play in these struggles.

Scholars have noticed that some new religious movements play a significant role in the struggle for women's rights. Ting Jen-chieh argues that under the Chinese patriarchal society, the role of the daughter implies a minimal degree of autonomy. Ting suggested that women living in Chinese societies often feel psychologically repressed by the patriarchy's many demands, and their needing a way out fueled the growth of new religious movements (Ting 2020). Ting is not alone. Wong Wai-ching also argued that women have little place in East Asian traditional and folk religions because of their inherent patriarchal tendencies. As a result, East Asian women often resort to Western religions such as Christianity in their attempt to find more space (Wong 2004, XXXII). In addition, Li Yuchen suggests that women have been the silent majority in the religious sphere, and most women are excluded from religious texts and traditions. It is thus important to examine the female experience in religions (Li 1996).

Moreover, Li Yuchen's latest research analyzes female participation in new religious movements. In her studies of Daesoon Jinrihoe, she suggests that modern Korean politico-economic upheavals induced great suffering on the Korean people, and women, who were at the bottom of the social strata, suffered even more. Li Yuchen, whose work is one of the inspirations for this part of our article, further discusses the success of Daesoon Jinrihoe from a female perspective to understand the values of new religious movements and compare the religious niches for women in such movements in Eastern Asia (Li 2020). In short, the connection between women's rights and religion is particularly strong when it comes to new religious movements.

That being said, there is a dialectical relationship between religion and women's rights. Sometimes religion plays a positive role to protect, lead, and empower women's rights; other times, religion is reduced by conservative forces to an excuse to oppress women. This is why feminist researchers in the past have taken a more critical perspective on religion and gender issues. Citing the work of various Western scholars, Tian Hai-Hua suggests that in the evolution of human society and culture, it is almost a universal phenomenon that women have been assigned more subordinate roles. This is vividly illustrated by the Hebrew Bible, where often the life and bodies of women have been under the control of men (Tian 2006). Like the Jewish faith, conventional Christian theology has also been frequently criticized by feminists.

Apart from theological debates, whether women can serve as clergy is also another dilemma, one where the churches do not necessarily practice what they preach. Even when women have served and acted as clergy for many years, they still face more obstacles than men. As Tsai Min-hui (2003) puts it, God's punishment for human original sin was somehow twisted into a justification for men's domination over women.

Tsai further argues that the conventional view that the husband is the "head" and the wife is the "body" is more a cultural product than a universal truth. Although John Calvin (1509–1564) once suggested that men and women should live in harmony, his gendered theology still prioritized men over women, who he argued have no right to question or disobey men. Calvin ultimately posits that men should always assume leadership positions (Tsai 2003). The imposition of the "virtue" of obedience has made it difficult for women to take leadership roles. Even when women do lead, they are expected to be obedient to men. If the church

has a congregational polity, the senior pastor is usually male; and if the church has a hierarchical polity, then branch leaders can be female as long as a male takes the central authoritative position. As we can see, many churches still operate on the implicit “spiritual principle” of “men before women” and “men lead, women assist” (Tsai 2003, 68–9).

Theologian Paul King Jewett (1920–1991) studied arguments against female clergy among Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Anglicans, and organized them into three types of motivations. First, allowing women to lead services would alter the mood of worshiping because men will have sexual thoughts for female clergy. Second, women should not take leadership positions because they were only created after men. Third, given that Jesus and the twelve apostles were all men, women cannot serve as representatives of God (Jewett 1980).

Christians in East Asia echo these arguments. Chuang Shu-chen points out that the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan needs better “gender justice” practices. In the 1990s, female clergy only accounted for 2% of those who participated in headquarters meetings. As of 2017, female Presbyterian clergy accounted for 17.86%. Even so, female clergy are underrepresented and discriminated, and some churches have jointly declared their unwillingness to receive women as pastors (Chuang 2019, 54–8).

Despite all the negative influences mentioned above, Christianity has a dynamic instead of a static relationship with women’s rights movements. Theologian Rosemary R. Ruether believes that one needs to start from tackling “theories of God” to challenge traditional dualist theology, according to which the female is dominated by the male (Grenz and Olson 1993). Ruether (1993) argues that the Bible offers an equal portrayal of males and females: biblical texts do not claim that women belong or are subordinate to men. If the words used to describe God as male are just allegories, then there exist no grounds to support the idea that women are subordinate to men.

Scholars have also discussed whether women may be regarded as divine. Lin Jen-chien (2018) studied Aisha (613?–678), one of Muhammad’s (570–632) wives, Muhammad’s daughter Fatimah (605?–632), and Maryam, as Mary the mother of Jesus is called in the Quran, to study how the “essence of divinity” could have been attributed to these women (Lin 2018, 99–101). These works prompt us to rethink whether it is possible to support the women’s rights

movement out of sources other than conventional theology, including the doctrines and practices of new religious movements.

I would suggest that the Providence Church offers interpretations that give more space to women in the religious sphere. On the one hand, Providence Church from Korea has its fair share of conventional Christian beliefs, but on the other hand it is also a new religious movement. We should now study President Jung's feminist theology and examine the practices of the Providence Church to see whether they allow for a fairer religious space for women.

Discourses on Feminist Theology by the Providence Church

Conventional theology about women is connected with the narrative of the fall in the Genesis, hence is susceptible to patriarchal interpretations such as "Adam was seduced by Eve" or "the husband shall rule over the wife." Ruether believes that the ancient portrayals of God's feminine characteristics are simply ignored, although they are not eliminated. The feminine depictions of wisdom and spirits are inherent in the Jewish tradition. In addition, in some early Christian non-canonical gospels, the Holy Spirit is seen as a feminine being. The *Gospel of the Hebrews* states that, "Even so did my mother, the Holy Spirit, take me by one of my hairs and carry me away on to the great mountain Tabor" (Ruether 1993, 59).

Ruether (1993) finds the feminine portrait of the Holy Spirit to have existed from the beginnings of Christian theology, especially among the mystics. This is also prominent in Christian iconographies. In a church not far from Munich, a 14th century fresco depicts the Trinity, where three icons share the same roots: an elderly man as the Holy Father, a younger man as the Holy Son, and a woman as the Holy Spirit (Ruether 1983, 60).

Ruether further argues that we should not brand the feminine portrait of the Holy Spirit as a later aberrant invention of Christian heresy. In contrast, what we see is that an earlier Christianity open to feminine portraits of God was gradually marginalized by a Greco-Roman Christian theology (Ruether 1993, 72–6). Even if ancient Christian traditions acknowledged both the masculinity and femininity of God, hence the divinity of the woman, she was still subordinate to the man. If this is the case, God cannot be really transcendent, and the idea that God is above all becomes the idea that the man is above the woman.

Providence's President Jung has not been through systematic theological or academic training, so presumably he has not been trained in feminist theology—he might not even know what feminism means—but based on his own family and church-leading experience, he expressed many thoughts related to gender issues. For example,

When I was young, sometimes I had arguments with my younger sister. My mother would defend her even when it was her fault. I remember feeling alienated because of that. However, I have come to understand the parental sentiment to stand on a daughter's side even when the fault is hers. During the Vietnam War, an enemy soldier and I were pointing guns at each other... In this disadvantaged situation, I sought help from God, then I heard a voice loud enough to shake the entire world. It was an imperative: "Love!" After hearing this command, I asked God: "If I love my enemy, he's going to shoot and kill me." As soon as I had that in mind, I hear God once again telling me: "Love." Even if my enemy were going to shoot me, I couldn't care more about the heat of the battle. I approached the enemy because following the word of God is the most important thing in my life. When I approached him, his face clearly turned into the face of my sister. He didn't open fire. I hugged him and we talked for about forty minutes (Jung 2017).

Living in a Korean society based on a hierarchical social order that prioritizes men and seniority, Jung found himself more compassionate to women, which might have been an extension of his bonds with his sister. Jung frequently mentions his sister in his sermons, in particular the above incident during the Vietnam War, where he saw his sister in a vision in the middle of the battle, and all of a sudden saw a North Vietnamese soldier as his sister. They both put down their weapons to weep in tears. This incident would later come to greatly shape Jung's theology of women.

The theology of Providence Church emphasizes gender equality. Jung begins from the purpose of creation to interpret gender. Discussing how modern society distinguishes biological sex from gender, Jung cites Revelation "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (*Revelation 21:2*, NIV), to suggest that the new era has arrived as foretold in the Bible, and the ideal relation between God and humans should now be one of "husband and wife." He thus makes the distinction between biological sex and "spiritual gender," or the gender of the soul, which in some ways offer a narrative on "the religious body" (Lu 2000, 276–77):

Male or female, humans are loved by God (Jung 2012).

Humans play the “role of the bride,” and humans are for God, the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Son “counterparts of love”... If we love water, would “the gender of the water” matter? If we love food, would “the gender of the food” matter? The Holy Spirit sees human beings in this way (Jung 2018a).

Although Jung still acknowledges the difference between biological sexes, he believes that from the perspective of the soul, both biological males and biological females are to God what the bride is to the husband. His narrative downplays texts susceptible to disadvantageous interpretations of the status of women, offers a different interpretation of gender relations from the fundamental purpose of creation, and affirms that from the perspective of the Creator, men and women are entirely equal (Jung 2012). In some ways, Jung offers a degendered (or even fully feminized) biblical exegesis of the religious body. As we have seen, Jung reinterprets conventional theology concerned with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and affirms the values of the feminine. While a more conservative theology sees the Trinity as a mystery not to be easily tampered with, feminist theology attempts to replace masculine interpretations of “the Holy Father” with feminist interpretations of the Creator (Yeh 2001). Jung sees the Holy Spirit as a “feminine” being. In his own words:

The Holy Spirit is a feminine God, the highest empress and heavenly mother under the heavens and above earth. Since She is a feminine God, She carefully tends to her creations and educates them meticulously. Those who believe the Holy Spirit to be weak because She is a woman are ignorant ones (Jung 2015a).

The view that the Holy Spirit is a woman or a mother is not unique to Jung, but he is more original in insisting that the Holy Spirit is an omnipotent female being who is one of the Creators of humankind. This is echoed, he suggests, in *Genesis* 1:26, where God, as if conversing with some other beings, creates humankind in “their” image and likeness.

Like Ruether, Jung sees the Holy Spirit as a feminine being, and affirms the feminine values of a co-creator:

The Holy Spirit is the Goddess most beautiful under the heavens and above the earth. She has “the highest beauty under the heavens and above the earth.” Her face is covered by a radiant light, so no beings can see Her real face. Although beings can see an image of the Holy Spirit according to their own spiritual level, no one can entirely see the true face of the Holy Spirit. Only those who recognize and understand the Holy Spirit can closely serve and love Her. Even if you cannot see her, imagine. Imagine the Holy Spirit as a being “most beautiful under the heavens and above the earth,” serve and obey Her words all the time, and do not add to Her worries. The Holy Spirit is beautiful and pure.

The Holy Spirit is a feminine God, so it is easiest to recognize and know Her through the female image (Jung 2015b).

Although Jung also emphasizes the mystical properties of the Holy Spirit as conventional theologians do, such that human beings can never perceive her real being, his sermons more frequently emphasize the idea that the Holy Spirit is a feminine God who more frequently works through “the female,” and that those who have faith should imagine the Holy Spirit as “the most beautiful under the heavens and above the earth.” However, concerning how the Holy Spirit sees what is beautiful, Jung says:

There is one thing you can do to anger the Holy Spirit. What do you think is that? It is when you criticize a woman for not being beautiful. This is when the Holy Spirit will reprove you. Just like in a family, when the brother asks the mother why his sister is so ugly, the mother will respond “And are you handsome? You’re not handsome because you look like your father.” In this way, the Holy Spirit is like the mother. If you criticize her creation for being ugly, she will express disapproval of you (Jung 2018e).

Bullying people for their appearance occurs frequently among campuses and across the Internet. Jung tackles these contemporary issues, which is one reason why his younger followers find his sermons relevant.

As Ruether (1993) underlines, in many Christian traditions and throughout the patriarchal theology of Christianity, women are banned from serving prominent positions in the church. Women cannot take leadership positions in the church, just as they cannot take leadership positions in secular societies. Under Christian patriarchies, women usually are given subordinate roles, and their duty is just to obey or remain silent.

Although Jung himself is a male who grew up in the highly patriarchal society of Korea, he takes female service in the church seriously and gives women equal access to all positions. Young women in his church can take prominent clerical positions authorized to give sermons and administer sacraments. The theological interpretation that the Holy Spirit is feminine is not just a theory in Jung’s church, but something that has been put in practice concerning daily administration:

When the Holy Spirit works, She chooses a vessel with a physical body, that is, She chooses from a pool of women, then works through that person and demonstrates the image and being of the Holy Spirit... Preacher Joeun is a female, and amongst many women, the Holy Spirit chose her and gave her a mission. The Holy Spirit as well as the Holy Son works through Preacher Joeun to facilitate the works of the Holy Spirit. When

the Holy Spirit works, the Holy Son too works through the female image to reflect the looks, image, and qualities of the Holy Spirit... (Jung 2013a).

Every woman on this earth is a potential vessel of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Son will choose women who can “reflect the qualities of the Holy Spirit” as the core vessel to carry out Providence and do the work of the Holy Spirit (Jung 2013a).

The Providence Church affirms the importance of women from its theology of the Creator, and puts its theological teachings into practice and administration. In the previous passage, Jung emphasizes that every woman is a vessel of the Holy Spirit, and women can properly reflect the radiant qualities of the Holy Spirit, more so than men. Even Jung, the founder of the church, acknowledged that in this aspect he cannot outperform the female figure who has been given the mission, i.e., Pastor Jung Joeun:

The Holy Spirit is a female God, so apart from myself, among women there needs to be someone who can serve as “the embodiment and body of the Holy Spirit” (Jung 2015b).

Preacher Joeun’s mission is not to serve as a substitute for me. God, the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Son have chosen and educated a person among women, so that she could become “the representative of brides” (Jung 2015b).

As the founder of a new religious movement, Jung is a charismatic leader and is highly respected by his followers. However, he is willing to accept the pivotal role women play in representing the Holy Spirit to serve God, epitomized by Pastor Jung Joeun, who gave sermons and held revival meetings in Korea and abroad when Jung was in prison. When she was still young and had only been in the church for a short time, Jung recognized her efforts, and she eventually made irreplaceable contributions to the development of Providence, highlighting the importance of female devotees.

In the past, media and public opinion have often portrayed the Providence Church as a centralized organization that practices the personality cult of its leader. This is the main reason why critics of the church condemn it as a “cult,” and brand Jung as a “cult leader,” the more so after he was sentenced to ten years in prison for sexual abuse and rape. Notwithstanding the court verdict, Providence believers maintain that Jung was innocent and point out both that China, a country without religious freedom, after ten months of investigation, had released him due to a lack of evidence (see Introvigne 2020; Akimoto 2019, 122–24), and that the Korean judicial system was susceptible to the influence of

mainstream Christian churches, and anti-cultists. One Providence devotee expressed the perception of church members by writing that,

The reason for this decision was because: “Although there is no concrete evidence for the accusations... the court accepts the testimonies of the female victims and the reports of Japanese magazines... Jung was in a position of power concerning female followers... Henceforth, the court believes the accusations that Jung treated the female victims with violence.” Even when there was a lack of physical evidence, the judge preferred to believe the prosecutor and the testimonies of the female plaintiffs. Thus said the judge: “It didn’t matter that there wasn’t any physical evidence. The defendant is a cult leader, and women followers must have found it hard to resist his demands.” The judge further added: “If Jung had been an average salary man, the court would not have found him guilty” (Akimoto 2019, 125–26).

Due to the sentence and ten years of imprisonment of its founder, followers of the Providence Church lived a tumultuous decade plagued with controversies and crises. However, the church grew in this decade, a phenomenon of interest to sociologists (Introvigne 2020). During his imprisonment, Jung wrote sermons and letters that firmly established the prominence of female clergy in his church. In a Confucian Korea that has a long track record for emphasizing seniority and favoring men (Deuchler 1992), Jung’s willingness to give women equal opportunity in the church could be considered a bold gesture.

Interviews and Analyses of Female Leaders of the Providence Church in Taiwan

In the decade of his imprisonment, Jung further elaborated his theological foundations for the prominence of women in church service. We focus here on Taiwan, which is one of the three key areas for Providence, the other two being South Korea and Japan. Ever since its inception in Taiwan, the Providence Church has never imposed any restrictions on gender for any clerical or ministerial positions. In fact, women took many important positions. They were able to give sermons and lead the church. As for clergy gender ratio, women would occasionally outnumber men.

This study interviews two senior female pastors and one upcoming pastor to analyze the image of female leaders in the Providence Church. The first interviewee, Pastor Lee, studied in Taipei First Girl’s High School; she was in the Class for the Math and Science Gifted, placed first in her year, was granted admission to the chemistry department of National Taiwan University (NTU), and

eventually graduated with a master's degree in Medicine. After her graduate studies in 2003, she was delegated as a pastor to lead a small-sized church of 20. The same church eventually grew into 500. Apart from leading the local church, she also partook in nationwide decision making. In retrospect, she said:

My father is a professor of geoscience. I've performed well in studies related to science since I was a kid. But this made me think: what is the goal of performing better than other people? I would later think: perhaps to benefit people (personal interview, 2020).

From Lee's background, had she not been exposed to religion, she might have become a scientist. During the interview, she recalled being summoned by Taiwan's president because she was about to represent Taiwan in an international science fair:

I was going to be in the next cohort of students to represent Taiwan in the international science fair. My face was on portraits hanging in the presidential palace... but even if that was considered to be very honorable, and I achieved what I thought to be the highest reachable goal at my age, there were still many problems I could not solve. That's why I started listening to the word of God (personal interview, 2020).

After the international science fair, Lee was not satisfied with just scientific knowledge. Therefore, she joined the Providence Church in search of something more. She also started thinking about issues in the humanities and social sciences:

I remember reading *Datung* and *Xiaokang*, where Confucius [551–479 BCE] discusses his vision of the best and second-best regime. Our high school teacher asked if anyone thought the ideal regime of Confucius was possible, and only two students raised their hands; one was me, the other a Christian friend. I thought at that time, if elites like my peers thought the ideal world wasn't possible, then it really can't be. About the same time, I started going to church. Although I was awarded admission to NTU Chemistry, and I did enjoy studying chemistry, what I really wanted to do was to catalyze a change of hearts with the word of God. This is why I wanted to serve in church (personal interview, 2020).

During her high school and early college years, Lee was intellectually ambitious, and along with her more idealistic personality, she pursued faith even further. But as a high school student and college first-year student, initially she did not take up many responsibilities in church. This changed when she graduated from college and was about to enter graduate school:

In 1999, the topic of the first sermon in January was "From East to West." Jesus told Pastor Jung to evangelize from East to West, so he left Korea. However, scandals

concerning Pastor Jung broke out in South Korea at the same time, and the church was full of mayhem and confusion. I was attending a church in Taipei; the male pastor would preach what you can find in magazines like *Business Weekly*. I was helping in the translation department, and I read sermons written by Pastor Jung, only to discover that the male pastor was not preaching according to the sermons he was supposed to preach. Not only was he preaching from his own experience, he even embezzled church funds... As communication between Pastor Jung and the church was cut off, I thought the church grew to have a more pressured atmosphere. Sometimes I would hear teachings of Yiguandao, that some pastors started practicing qigong with followers, and they would run around in the church in circles, even puke. It felt strange and I wanted to leave this kind of church. But at about the same time, I watched a movie called *K-19 The Widowmaker*, in which the main characters [offered the options to go to United States after a submarine disaster] decided to stay with the submarine and return to Russia. I changed my mind about leaving. I thought that if I left church and studied abroad, I would allow the church to fall apart. I decided to contact Pastor Jung even when communication was difficult. In the end, he took things in his own hands in a democratic manner. He asked all the members of the church to congregate, and asked: "Raise your hands if you want a different pastor." Although Pastor Jung didn't explicitly point out what the current pastor was doing wrong, half of the congregation voted to change the pastor. Eventually I was voted to be the pastor, and Pastor Jung boldly delegated me to lead the church, regardless of my youth and my gender (personal interview, 2020).

1999 was a turning point for the Providence Church. South Korean media delivered a full onslaught of attacks on the church. The Providence Church was facing an existential threat. Jung was in Europe, not in South Korea, and it was only natural for his churches in South Korea to face many problems. The churches in Taiwan too, were heavily impacted. Lee was just a young church member in 1999 and did not have a lot of experience. Yet, she was inspired by a movie to give up studying abroad, and stepped up to report how the male pastor was leading the congregation astray from its spiritual path. Jung, in turn, asked the congregation to vote, respected the democratic results, and appointed Lee as the new pastor. Until now, apart from serving as the main pastor of a single congregation, she has taken up many important positions in the Providence Church, such as the head of human resources in headquarters, one of the regional representative pastors of Taipei, and the pastor of campus fellowships in NTU. In 2018, Lee supervised the purchase and construction of the largest Providence church in Taiwan. She would become the pastor of a church that hosts over five hundred people.

The second interviewee is Pastor Sun, who graduated from Zhongshan Girls High School and from the department of international business from National Chengchi University (NCCU). She started serving in the central art department in the Providence Church when she was 20, and when she was 29, she became the pastor of a church about the size of 40 people. Three years later the church had over 100 members, and she was transferred to lead a church in Taipei. During the 12 years of her service, she served important positions such as the head of evangelization in headquarters and national revival preacher. She is currently the head pastor of Taipei's largest congregational region, which has about 1,000 members. In 2009 to 2010, she facilitated the reform from Korean personnel to native personnel in the headquarters of Taiwan.

This is the story of how Sun joined Providence clergy in Taiwan:

When I was a kid, I had two very peculiar thoughts. The first was that my parents weren't my biological parents. It's as if they just picked me up from some random place. The other was that I really wanted to outperform boys. I even wanted to be a boy. I was unhappy because I had to be a girl, and I thought the name my mother gave me was too effeminate. This was mostly because my mother valued sons and had a bias against daughters, and I resented her... When I started attending the Providence Church, I noticed that Pastor Jung treated women equally. I was thankful for being given so many responsibilities even when I had just joined from a short time.

When I was a sophomore, Pastor Jung told me that I should become the bridge between pastors and church members. I was shocked because I had been baptized for no more than two years. I didn't think I could function as any kind of bridge. Pastor Jung said: "When church members have doubts about the pastor, you should help them understand the intentions of the pastor. When pastors do not understand the church members, you should help pastors understand what they have in mind." I felt honored to have received such instructions as a college student, so whenever I had disagreements with anyone concerning church service, I would speak up. I really tried my best. Pastor Jung told me that I was sitting in the front-passenger seat, and the pastor was the driver; if the driver dozed off, it was my responsibility to wake the driver up. I remember being shocked because I didn't think as a young person, I could do anything important. However, Pastor Jung's words made me realize that God valued me even if I were young. Thereafter I worked harder in church and summoned my courage to express my thoughts. In 2009, I led Taiwan's headquarters to report to Pastor Jung about the improper conduct of a South Korean missionary. I requested that he recall the missionary. It was because he did this that the Providence Church at Taiwan was able to operate and thrive with more local personnel playing central roles (personal interview, 2020).

Sun never liked how her mother preferred sons to daughters, so she wanted to be a boy instead. This thought echoes with one of the reasons why women suffering from gender inequality wished they were men. When she had just joined the church, Sun thought she could not take on too many responsibilities. However, Jung encouraged the sophomore to express her ideas and speak up against male pastors despite her youthful age. Most importantly, in 2009, Sun was one of the few people who directly reported to Jung about the improper conducts of the above mentioned South Korean missionary, which resulted in his recall. After that, the Providence Church in Taiwan became more autonomous and achieved more progress in growth.

Apart from these achievements, Sun's motivation to stay single and dedicate the rest of her life to church service is worth mentioning:

When I just joined the church, I often heard male pastors saying things like “Women who don't marry become weird old virgins.” At that time, I didn't know that some people in the Providence Church remained celibate like Catholic priests and nuns, dedicating their lives to loving God without marrying. My family was rather traditional, so I had been told that women need to get married, assist their husbands, and educate their children. Because I witnessed too many unsuccessful marriages, I was afraid of marriage, and I didn't want to get married. After joining the Providence Church, I discovered that members were nice, so I grew open to the idea of getting married with someone in church. However, when I heard how Pastor Jung loved Jesus so much that he wouldn't marry, in my prayers I started to have the same idea not to marry in order to dedicate myself to church service... In the end, I chose not to marry and I enlisted as a full-time clergy. The reason was simple. I had very high standards for my ideal partner. He had to be someone better, someone who can teach me for the rest of my life; he needed to understand and be good at many things. However, I knew all too well the imperfections of human beings, and I thought that the Lord was the most perfect being, and God was the one who could teach me for the rest of my life. All things considered, why would I marry anyone else? (personal interview, 2020).

Although the Providence Church encourages marriage within the church, unlike most Protestant denominations Providence also preserved the Catholic tradition of remaining celibate to serve God. This option is available regardless of gender, and the internal name given to those who stay celibate to serve God is “Stars of Faith.” However, the female celibate members often became targets for detractors, who accused them of being involved in “sexual scandals” (Introvigne 2020).

Through our interviews with Sun, we found that her motivation is closer to what Ting Jen-chieh (2020) pointed out in his research: to pursue autonomy. Although Ting's focus groups are Buddhists and Sun is a Christian, the idea of celibacy and dedicating oneself to religion can be viewed in both cases as a fully conscientious choice.

The last female interviewee belongs to a younger generation in the Providence Church. Gu, who double majored in Sociology and Bio-Industry Communication and Development, joined the church as a first-year college student. After graduation she worked as an administrator in the department of social work, and after work she would help lead the NTU campus fellowship. She graduated from the Providence Church's own seminary a few years ago, took a position similar to an associate vicar at a church near NTU, and decided to work full-time for the church. During the interview, Gu discussed how the Providence Church viewed female talents and helped foster their church careers:

Unlike the workforce that has a glass ceiling, the Providence Church does not hesitate to delegate prominent positions to women. Instead, merit and personality are prioritized when it comes to human resources. I compared the ratio of male to female pastors and the gender ratio of those who attended the seminary, and I concluded that the Providence Church gives equal opportunity to everyone. As a matter of fact, in the many years of my experience, women are often more motivated, perform better, and even outnumber men (personal interview, 2020).

Gu's observation is representative of the latest developments of the Providence Church in Taiwan. She even collected data on clergy gender ratio, and compared Providence with other Christian denominations.

According to Gu's statistics, there are 110 clergy members in the Providence Church in Taiwan. 67.2%, or 74 of them, are female. In the 19 churches across Taiwan, 31 of the 43 pastors and associate pastors (or those authorized to give sermons and lead the church) are female, which is about 72%. Of these 31 female clergy members, 14 serve as the main pastor. One thing worth mentioning is that in churches with over 300 members all the main pastors are women. In addition, 5 of the 6 regional congregations are led by female clergy, which is about 83%. Most important of all, 5 of the 7 seats on headquarters are entrusted to women (71%). This group has decision-making power for national affairs and is at the top of Providence's organizational hierarchy in Taiwan.

Members of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, such as Chuang Shu-chen, are still rallying for gender justice. According to Chuang's statistics, in headquarters meetings of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan in 1990, just 2% of the participants were female. These numbers grew to 17.86% in 2017. Female clergy still face discrimination in terms of both theory and practice. Some of their church members still openly refuse to accept female clergy appointments (Chuang 2019, 54–8). As for the Providence Church in Taiwan, ever since its inception between 1987 and 1988, women have accounted for more than 50% of clergy members. Providence Church members generally take it for granted that women can serve as clergy and take leadership positions.

Apart from female perspectives, interviews with male pastors were also conducted to provide a different angle on the female image in the Providence Church. One interviewee, Pastor Chou, who graduated from NTU Law, is one of the most senior members in Taiwan:

I studied in a seminary in the States for three years and saw many churches. After receiving my Master of Divinity, I returned to Taiwan to serve. Because I've observed many denominations, I noticed that ever since the first native clergy, Pastor Lai, was ordained, along with the ordination of many female elders and deaconesses later, the Providence Church, by fully respecting women, has proven to be unhindered by the many taboos of conventional churches; not to mention those ordained who come from different generations... After I returned to Taiwan from the States in 2002, I noticed that local churches in central and southern Taiwan were struggling because there weren't any missionaries who were pastors, so I discussed with my wife and prayed to God to see what I can do to serve Him better. In the end I decided to travel south to Taichung to help with evangelization. I was responsible for helping the church, while my wife took care of the bread... Many church members in Taichung were medical school students, who later became doctors, pharmacists, nutrition scientists, and clinical scientists. Some of them even opened clinics of their own. The gender balance at that time was about 1:1. Those who were ordained as female elders or clergy were professionally accomplished people passionate to help the church grow. Associate pastors were also professionals who temporarily set work aside to serve the church full time. One of them was a registered nurse, the other a counselor. Both of them are now married and have their own full-time careers. I believe these are good cases that demonstrate how the church is not confined to conventional gender roles within Christianity (personal interview, 2020).

Chou himself used to be in a mainstream church, which gives him a comparative perspective. He witnessed how very different women, such as celibate clergy, married clergy, and other professionals, could all take leadership positions or play prominent roles in the Providence Church. Chou's success in Taichung was

partly due to his willingness to let female church members take important positions. These members often had medical backgrounds and had much to contribute.

From these examples, we can see that the feminist theology of the Providence Church is not just theoretical, but also practical. Considering the fact that both South Korea and Taiwan's social orders have been influenced by Confucian patriarchal ideas, the Providence Church is carving out more space for women to pursue autonomy.

Revisiting the “Brainwashing” Thesis Concerning Female Followers of New Religious Movements

Patriarchal prejudice sees women as sentimental, lacking in rational judgement, easily dominated by external factors, and gullible to men. We can derive a list of such prejudices from Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986):

Not accepting logical principles and moral imperatives, skeptical about the laws of nature, woman lacks the sense of the universal; to her the world seems a confused conglomeration of special cases. This explains why she believes more readily in the tittle-tattle of a neighbor than in a scientific explanation... Within her sphere all is magic; outside, all is mystery. She is unfamiliar with the criterion of plausibility; only immediate experience carries conviction—her own experience, or that of others if stated emphatically enough. As for her own self, she feels she is a special case because she is isolated in her home and hence does not come into active contact with other women; she is always expecting that destiny and men will make an exception in her favor. She believes in her intuitions much more firmly than in universally valid reasoning... (de Beauvoir 1956, 584–85).

Patriarchy assumes that women believe in intuition and mysticism instead of reason and inference, not to mention scientific explanations (Huang 2001). Likewise, accusations from mainstream media and mainstream religions that charismatic “cult” leaders “brainwash” female followers of new religious movements share the same rhetoric. They argue that female believers unconditionally accept every unreasonable demand from “cult” leaders, even sexual advances or rape. In doing so, accusers are depriving women of their agency. They deny that it is possible for them to break out of the shackles of religious patriarchy to pursue autonomy in new religious movements.

“Cults” are frequently accused of “brainwashing” female (and male) believers, and leaders of new religious movements are often accused of demanding sexual favors from their followers. However, the “brainwashing thesis” in general has long since been debunked by Western scholars of new religious movements (Barker 1984; Richardson 1993; Richardson and Introvigne 2001). Accusations that women are coerced into sexual relationships by male leaders of new religious movements may be true in some comparatively rare cases. More often, they are unfounded, and serve the patriarchal prejudice in their own way by stigmatizing and infantilizing women who attempt to pursue autonomy through unconventional means.

Taiwanese have lived under patriarchy for a long time. It is not surprising that news about rape usually incite strong reaction and criticism from the society. However, reactions to such incidents are shaped by the structure of patriarchy, which may influence how the women involved are perceived (Tsai and Su 2016, 87).

Due to the commercialization of the media, reports on sexual violence have been increasing, and the content is becoming more explicit. The intention is to hook readers with these explicit reports (Tsai and Su 2016, 91). These kinds of news risk to report male on female sexual violence in a normalized, individualized, and trivialized manner, which reinforces male dominance and is consistent with the ideology of patriarchy. Taiwanese mass media often adopt what has been called “excitable speech” to reinforce a fascination with rape, which contributes to a culture that reacts excitedly to sexual transgression against women (Tsai and Su 2016, 91). Mass media do not care about social justice or the well-being of victims, but about whether the articles can gauge the readers’ interest (Tsai and Su 2016, 99). In news and magazines concerning sexual assaults, a kind of “media truth” that exaggerates words and pictures is created to highlight sexual violence. Mass media resorts to imagination to reconstruct incidents, offering readers a channel to take pleasure in peeking into other people’s lives (Tsai and Su 2016, 125).

This is reflected in the sensational titles that followed accusations against President Jung in South Korea, and claimed women had been abused by him also in Taiwan:

The latest issue of *Next Magazine* uses huge fonts and pictures to report how the leader of the Korean Providence Church, Jung Myung-seok, claimed to be the messiah to lure hundreds of campus beauties to sleep with him (*Next Magazine* 2001).

According to Taiwan media reports, the cult has invaded the campus, and hundreds of female students from National Taiwan University and Central University were raped by the leader (*People's Daily Online* 2001).

Models are expressing themselves on the catwalk. They look professional, but no one can see that they are students at National Central University... the founder of their organization is the Providence cult leader Jung Myung-seok, who is wanted by the Taipei District Prosecutors Office... (*CTS* 2005).

The Providence cult, originally from Korea, has been active in Taiwan for about ten years. Most of their members are from elite universities such as NCCU, NTU, and National Central University, the evil cult leader raped hundreds of female college students... (*KK News* 2016)

The Providence cult uses extracurricular activities such as sports and music to lure college students to join them. They even have a “model department” and “female cheerleading group” to specifically lure young and beautiful female college students (*KK News* 2016).

The leader of the Korean Providence cult targets virgins (*KK News* 2016).

Some terms used in the content mentioned above, such as “campus beauties,” “virgins,” and “young and beautiful female college students,” reflect the fetishes of a patriarchal society. They serve a rhetoric that denies the agency of women by insinuating that elite female college students who joined Providence are incapable of rational thought and making their own common-sense judgements.

While it is true that Jung was investigated in Taiwan, the case was closed and the authorities determined that none of the accusations was corroborated by evidence. In fact, Providence threatened to sue or sued some of the accusers for defamation. Some of the cases were settled with letters of apology from the accusers such as the following:

I, XXX, currently enrolled in XXX University, contacted *Apple Daily* in October 2005 to disseminate false information defaming your church and the founder of your church Pastor Jung Myung-seok, as well as Pastor Lin Chang-ching, and Pastor Lin Hui-chuan. At the same time, I used PTT Gossip and Hate forums... along with various electronic bulletin boards to spread false accusations that defamed your church. I recognize that my actions have greatly damaged your reputation, and caused tremendous troubles to Pastor Jung, Pastor Lin, and Pastor Hong, among many other pastors and church members... After introspection, I am deeply regretful, and I hereby express my deep regret and

promise never to disseminate any false information again. If there will be a violation, I will accept the severe punishment of the law... (Figure 1).

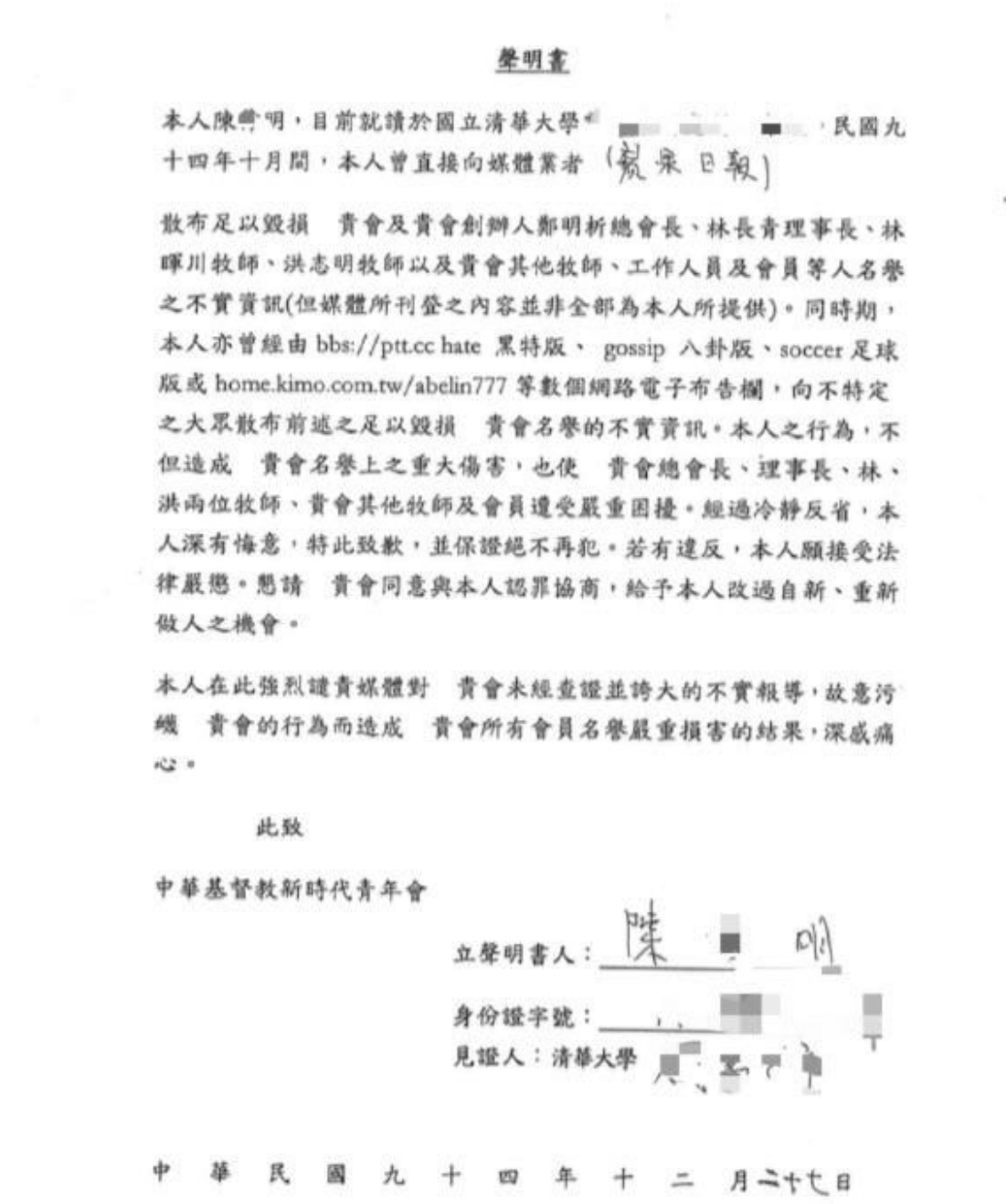


Figure 1. Letter of apology from XXX.

I, YYY, spread false accusations against Christian Gospel Mission (a.k.a. Providence Church) on the Internet from 2005 to 2006, causing negative impressions and misunderstanding of your church in Taiwanese society, and causing trouble to church members. I sincerely apologize to the church and its members, and I hope that the church and its members would give me an opportunity to repent and reform. I hereby

state that I will not make any false accusation(s) again in the future. Otherwise I will be severely punished by the law (Figure 2).

聲 明 書

本人 陳 ■ 明，於民國 94 年至 95 年間在網路上發表對中華基督教新時代青年會(社會大眾普遍所知曉的攝理教會)不實及污滅文章，造成社會大眾對其產生負面觀感及誤解，並造成該會眾教友困擾，對此本人感到相當抱歉，在此聲明中對該宗教團體致歉，也感謝該宗教團體人士包容及諒解，並給予本人改過自新的機會，本人在此切結，保證日後不會再犯，否則將受法律嚴厲制裁。

此 致

中華基督教新時代青年會

聲明人：陳 ■ 明

陳 ■ 明

身分證字號

住址：

中華民國九十五年八月十一日

Figure 2. Letter of apology from YYY.

In other case, the accusers did not settle, and were sentenced by Taiwanese criminal courts for slander. For example, in June 2006, the Keelung District Court sentenced Wang Wen-yi to 30 days of criminal detention with a probation of 2 years for spreading false rumors of “[President] Jung sexually assaulting

female followers” (Figure 3). However, the damage to Providence Church’s reputation was irreversible.

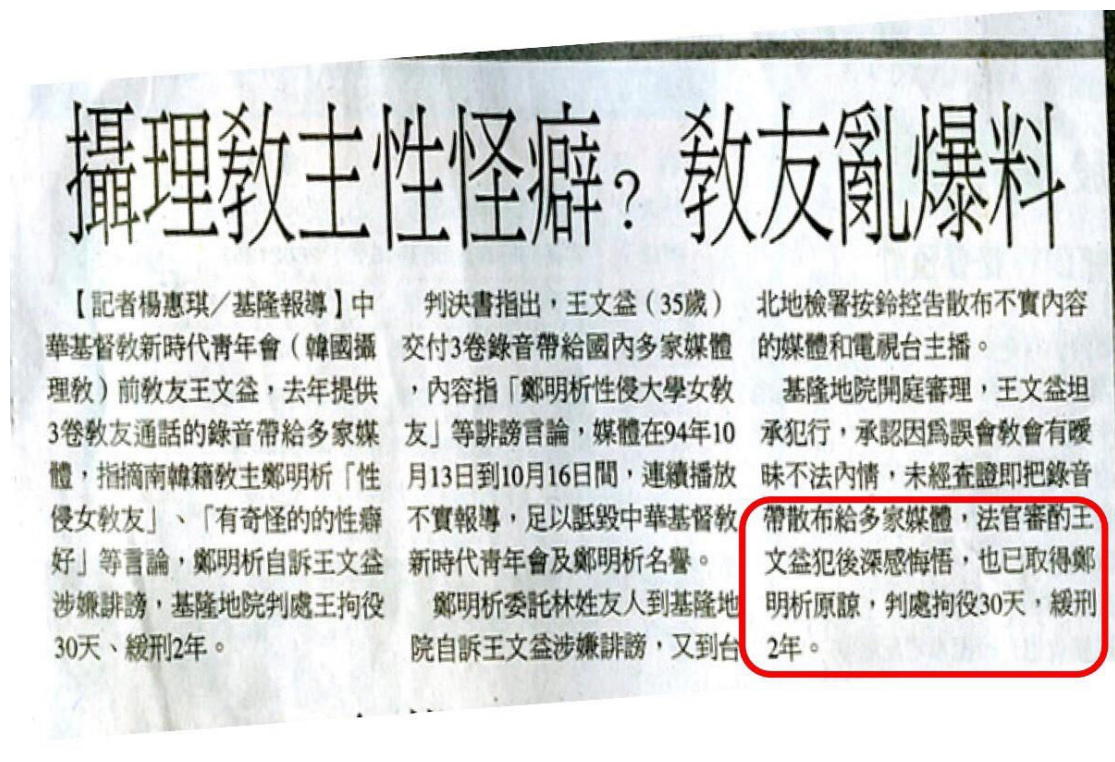


Figure 3. Reference to decision against Wang Wen-yi.

Citing American philosopher Lynne Tirrell’s works, Yang Wan-ying pointed out that calling a mature women a “girl” is an act of assigning her a certain role that denies her adulthood and justifies the way paternalism treats her. Likewise, calling a mature women a “maiden” not only provides an excuse for paying less salary and discrediting her decision-making abilities, but also denies her autonomy and judgement. Once being branded as a lesser, lesser treatment follows (Yang 2019, 182–92). By depicting Providence female members as “brainwashed girls” or “concubines of a cult leader,” detractors and mass media denied their autonomy and perpetuated patriarchal stereotypes.

Religious Tensions Rise During the COVID-19 Pandemic

New religious movements were again stereotyped and discriminated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yuval Noah Harari, an Israeli historian and the author of *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2014), believes that the decisions people make in response to the COVID-19 pandemic could change the lives of

people for years to come (Harari 2020). Will the impact of COVID-19 crisis on societies, economies, and countries bring human communities closer together or do the exact opposite? Will law enforcement agencies and surveillance systems be designed to protect or to coerce civilians? These challenges are addressed differently around the world. Instead of drawing a hasty conclusion on post-pandemic opportunities, we would like to argue that the pandemic probably helps us reexamine the problems that have been haunting our society.

Religious tension is on the rise in many parts of the world, and was exacerbated by the pandemic. In East Asia, particularly in South Korea, relevant conflicts were reported by international media outlet such as *The New York Times* and the *CNN* (Choe 2020; Hancocks 2020). Looking back at what happened in 2020, we cannot ignore how South Korean public opinion was manipulated by some conservative Christian groups with the intention to make new religious movements the target of a witch hunt.

According to a study by Chiu Hei-yuan (2001), new religious movements usually face persecution from two directions—from authoritarian governments and from mainstream denominations. Both the authoritarian Nationalist government and Communist China inherited the old notion and the policy of ancient Chinese dynasties to root out groups classified as *xie jiao* (“heterodox teachings,” or “evil cults”). During the period of martial law in Taiwan, the Nationalist government also labeled Yiguandao and other sects that are distinct from pre-existing religions as *xie jiao*.

The category of *xie jiao* (Introvigne 2021c) was used both in Taiwan, during the martial law period, and in Mainland China in the 1950s for the now forgotten massive persecution of Yiguandao, a large Chinese non-Christian new religious movement, which in fact became the model for the subsequent repression of other groups. Many new religious movements are also rejected by mainstream denominations. The more neutral stance by scholars of new religious movements may help neutralize the influence of the negative public perception of new religious movements (Lin 2004), yet the latter continues to be spread by the media, with the religious conflicts in South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic providing a textbook example.

South Korean COVID-19 Witch Hunts Against New Religious Movements

The Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a new religious movement founded in South Korea, was blamed for the country's first coronavirus outbreak in the first half of 2020. Shincheonji and related groups were scapegoated and labeled as responsible for the majority of infections in the country. The actions taken against Shincheonji could be regarded almost as a witch-hunt. For example, its leader and other members were arrested and the permission for establishment was revoked. The city of Daegu, once the epicenter of the pandemic, was seeking billions of won in damages from Shincheonji and its leader Lee Man-Hee in a lawsuit. Moreover, hundreds of thousands of South Koreans signed a petition calling for the forcible dissolution of Shincheonji. COVID-19 was used as a pretext for persecution of an unpopular movement (Tsai 2021), although eventually Lee and the other Shincheonji leaders who had been arrested were found innocent of all COVID-related charges both in first degree and appeal (Introvigne 2021a, 2021b).

Regardless of the controversial nature of new religious movements, every believer shall have the right to freedom of religion and shall not be discriminated against because of his or her belief. Conservative Protestant denominations in South Korea were also accused of violating the laws on the prevention of epidemics, yet at the same time manipulated the public opinion to wipe out the new religious movements they saw as dangerous competitors (Grisafi 2021).

Scholars have pointed out that since the late 20th century, conservative Christian churches in South Korea spared no effort to promote the values of their respective denominations in the public arena through the use of media, tracts, or direct approach. Megachurches have long been lobbying members of the Parliament, leaders of political parties, and high-ranking government officials in an attempt to persuade policy-makers and administrators to adopt policy ideas that are favorable to members of conservative Christian groups. Conservative Protestant churches in South Korea wield enormous influence in politics and economics, and are often able to manipulate the public opinion (Guo 2014). Over time, conservative Christian denominations have been exerting considerable impact on the thinking of the majority of South Koreans. The most influential denominations also use their power to slander and stigmatize new religious movements.

Western scholars concluded that Lee Man-Hee and Shincheonji did not disobey the emergency measures or hamper disease control efforts (Introvigne et al. 2020; Burke 2020), and their position has been so far (since an appeal to the Supreme Court is pending) vindicated by Korean courts of law. There has also been a double standard in how Shincheonji and Protestant conservative churches, both accused of violation of COVID-related violations, have been treated by the authorities and the media. Fautré (2020) points out that the handling of the COVID-19 epidemic by the authorities in South Korea with regard to religious groups revealed a strong bias to the detriment of Shincheonji and a more conciliatory treatment of Protestant churches. Shincheonji was met with stigmatization, deceptive and destructive rumors, demands of lists of all members and properties, unfounded suspicions, threats, fiscal harassment, prosecutions, spurious charges, and arrests and imprisonment of several leaders, including the founder. As opposite to this, excessive tolerance and impunity were shown towards several Protestant churches that violated the prohibitions and continued to gather during the pandemic. Fautré provides concrete facts and evidence highlighting the discriminatory treatment of Shincheonji, and analyzes the religious and socio-political dynamics underpinning the harassment of this new religious movement. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, while protecting themselves, conservative Christian groups spread disinformation to scapegoat and hunt out of existence some new religious movements. The attempted annihilation of Shincheonji was just one of the examples.

Providence and COVID-19

Although the doctrines, practices, and rituals of Shincheonji may be controversial and unacceptable to most traditional Christian churches, in a democratic country like South Korea where the rule of law applies, freedom of religion should be guaranteed to all citizens. Shincheonji is not the only target of conservative South Korean Christian churches. They also attempt to wipe out other Christian new religious movements, including Providence. In the case of Providence, however, any attempt to connect it with the spread of COVID-19 clashed with the evidence, both in South Korea and Taiwan.

Since mid-February 2020, Providence has been implementing public health measures in accordance with the guidance and directives of state and local

authorities. Providence branches all over the world were called to maintain the highest level of vigilance, cancel all physical meetings, and hold online worship services only. In fact, Providence won the praise of the South Korean government for the record of almost zero confirmed cases of COVID-19 within the movement. On February 23, 2020, at a special meeting in response to the COVID-19 pandemic chaired by President Moon Jae-in, he thanked religious organizations that had proactively cancelled their activities and expressed his gratitude to those groups that had followed the public health guidance of the government. Providence had already decided to move worship services online in South Korea and in other Asian countries before Chung Sye-kyun, the South Korean Prime Minister, delivered a speech to the nation including this request on February 22, 2020 (Yoo 2020). Since March 2020, Taiwan Providence has also replaced events and gatherings in church buildings with online conferences and online worship services in the hope of minimizing the risk of infection (Christian Gospel Mission 2020; Table 1 below).

The COVID-19 Situations in Taiwan		Taiwan CGM Precautionary Measures	
1/16	WHO issued its first epidemiological alert on the novel coronavirus.	1/25	CGM announced the COVID-19 precautions and measures.
1/31	The cruise ship Diamond Princess, with several passengers who later tested positive to COVID-19, docked at the Port of Keelung.	2/2	CGM increased the knowledge of pandemic prevention in every branch with videos and other measures.
2/16	A private-hire car driver became one of the new confirmed cases and the number of local cases increased in Changhua.	2/8	CGM branch in Keelung was temporarily closed and members of the congregation were required to self-monitor.
2/29	The number of local infections exceeded that of imported cases.	2/20	CGM officially cancelled the concert that was going to be held on February 25.
		2/21	CGM branch in Changhua was temporarily closed and members of the congregation were required to self-monitor.
		3/2	CGM moved every gathering online.

Table 1. CGM (Providence) in Taiwan and COVID-19.

In his analysis of various new religious movements and their responses to SARS in 2003, professor Ding Ren-jieh, a researcher at the Institute for Sociology, Academia Sinica, singled out some religious groups that proactively cooperated with epidemic prevention measures announced by the government. In fact, Providence fits perfectly into such a category of religious groups. Professor Ting argues that in terms of common values and mechanisms that drive and bind societies, the expansion of civil society and the stability in the public sector do not seem to collide in East Asia, which is different from the development of Western societies. That is, leaders of civil societies in East Asia seldom take a strong position against government authorities unless under special circumstances.

The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan was used as an example in Ting's paper to illustrate religious groups that cooperated with the government during the SARS epidemic. During the COVID-19 epidemic, President Jung asked Providence members to comply with the government's COVID-19 policy. He proactively asked his followers to show respect for the medical profession and to adopt an extremely cautious attitude towards COVID-19. He did not use freedom of religion arguments to protest against restrictions on religious gatherings. We can conclude that Providence belongs to the type of religious groups that "uphold society values and urge collective responsibility" described by Ding (2003).

However, despite all its efforts to fight COVID-19, Providence was still attacked by traditional Christian denominations that took advantage of the pandemic. A South Korean religious network called Christian Broadcasting System (CBS) falsely argued in one of its TV programs that Providence had been hiding cases of infection. CBS, which has played a leading role in the witch hunt against Shincheonji, was clearly attempting to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to go after other new religious movements as well.

Ironically, it was among the CBS personnel that COVID-19 problems caused a disruption of services. CBS shut down its building and cancelled the regular radio programming after a reporter tested positive. After cleaning and disinfecting the entire building, CBS could re-open its programs on August 20, 2020 (*KBS World* 2021). This is another example of double standard: Christian conservative religionists badmouth the new religious movements as plague-spreaders, yet fail themselves to take the necessary precautions against COVID-19.

Conclusion

The articles addressed three different issues concerning Taiwan and Providence: the church's view of Taiwan and its subjectivity, its theology of womanhood, and its—and its opponents'—reactions to COVID-19.

Along with the globalization starting in the 1980s, the wave of decolonization swept over Taiwan. Unrelenting student movements and political activities highlighted the protest against China's oppression, the restoration of Taiwan's identity, and even the pursuit of Taiwan independence. The wider society encouraged the liberation of personality, which turned Taiwan into the most tolerant and inclusive country in East Asia. In 1987, the lifting of martial law in Taiwan was proclaimed. In that same year, Providence was introduced to Taiwan. Ever since President Jung got acquainted with Taiwanese intellectuals, he proclaimed Taiwan "a country" in front of all Providence members, outsiders, and public figures, and praised Taiwan highly among all Providence churches in the world.

Providence values are in line with the intellectual trends developed over the past forty years in Taiwan. Providence both follows the principle of separating church from state, and disagrees that politics is the answer to all questions in life. Whenever there is an election in Taiwan, the Providence leadership never gives any instructions to influence the members' vote. Even if a few Providence members have pro-China feelings, Taiwan's subjectivity is always valued and honored in the church. President Jung proclaims his great respect for Taiwan's history and cultures, and deeply sympathizes with the dilemmas and obstacles Taiwan confronts. His affirmation of Taiwan's subjectivity is one of the reasons the movement has been successful in Taiwan.

The second part of this article started from an analysis of Jung's feminist theology and practices, and pointed out various reasons why the Providence Church has been welcomed by a significant number of Taiwanese women since its very inception. It then tackled how public opinion and mass media often misunderstand female participants of new religious movements, depicting them as irrational, "brainwashed," and psychologically and sexually obsessed with "cult leaders." Contrary to this stereotypical image, we argued that women in Providence are in fact attempting to carve out their own space, and assert a form of autonomy that otherwise would not have been well-received in mainstream

society. They are one of Ruether's female minorities who choose a different source for their beliefs, resist religious tradition with more critical views, and explore heterodoxies that have previously been marginalized. These pursuits reflect an unwillingness to be simply happy with traditional views, and a deeper desire to look for meaning in a specific historical context (Ruether 1993, 28–9). If we can transcend how mass media infantilize female Providence members, we may be able to see how these women affirm in their own way a form of female autonomy in the religious space.

Like all churches, in the last months Providence had to confront COVID-19. American political theorist Francis Fukuyama observed that, confronted with the pandemic, some democracies have performed well, but others have not, and the same is true for autocracies. The factors responsible for successful responses to the pandemic, Fukuyama argues, are state capacity, social trust, and leadership. Countries with all three factors—a competent state apparatus, a government that citizens trust and listen to, and effective leaders—have performed impressively, limiting the damage they have suffered. Countries with dysfunctional states, polarized societies, or poor leadership have done badly, leaving their citizens and economies exposed and vulnerable (Fukuyama 2020).

Ever since the start of the global pandemic, the state-society collaboration to contain COVID-19 in Taiwan has been universally recognized as effective, and later became a model for other countries. Taiwan's remarkable achievement in combating COVID-19, as Fukuyama (2020) acknowledged, stems from the public trust in the medical profession and in the government.

If they want to battle COVID-19, religious communities should see the government as a partner rather than as an enemy, but in turn the government should not look at them with suspicion and prejudice. In Taiwan, both mainstream religions and new religious movements, with very rare exceptions, followed the advanced deployment and strict prevention measures announced by the government proactively and responsibly. The situation is different from South Korea, where several Christian churches were accused of continuing to gather and hold services after the government had prohibited them.

A parallel development in South Korea was that conservative Christian churches tried to take advantage of COVID-19 to denounce new religious movements they regard as “cults” as plague-spreaders, and try to destroy them. This strategy was, at least initially, successful with Shincheonji, but unsuccessful

with Providence, which could prove that it had complied with all COVID-related regulations. As opposite to South Korea, in Taiwan most mainline religious organizations did not use COVID-19 as an opportunity to spread untrue rumors or accusations against rival religious movements. While Taiwanese media in the past had slandered Providence and tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade the authorities that President Jung had abused women in Taiwan too, Korean accusations against Providence based on COVID-19 had a very limited echo in Taiwan. Both the political power of conservative Christian churches and a Confucian influence on Christianity that still shapes its attitude towards politics (Fang 2021), prevailing in South Korea, do not appear to be a significant part of the religious situation in Taiwan.

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