

The Conversion of Madness: The Case of John Sung

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Throughout his career as a revivalist, John Sung constantly drew attention to the experience that stamped him with a new Christian identity. In his autobiography, for instance, he devoted 81 of 100 chapters to the events that culminated in his spiritual awakening at Union Theological Seminary in New York and the subsequent 193 days he spent in an insane asylum. According to Sung, the incredible career he had as China's preeminent evangelist was merely the dénouement of the real drama: his conversion.

Decades later, a perusal of biographies, scholarly studies, popular websites, and blogs reveals how popular Sung's spiritual transformation continues to be. The story is retold largely as Sung first recorded it: on February 10, 1927 an audible voice declared to Sung, "Son, thy sins are forgiven." Invigorated by this word of God, Sung claimed he rushed through Union's halls shouting the Lord's praises and castigating the professors for enervating his faith until, in a most delicious irony, UTS, supposedly the expert on spiritual matters, banished the new convert to a psychiatric asylum.

New documentation, however, challenges this memorable account. In 2010, records were found in the archives of Union and the hospital. Additionally, in 2014 Sung's diaries from the time of his institutionalization were made public through the Yale Divinity School. Collectively, these sources tell a totally different story.

This raises important questions about Sung's conversion. What was it? When did it happen? How was it constructed? And how shall a person weigh the documentation left behind?