



Reimagining Ecclesiology from Chinese Christian Women's Perspectives: A Case Study of Florence Li Tim-Oi

Yanan LU  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5525-4480>

Graduate Theological Union

Abstract: In most Protestant churches in China, women constitute approximately 70% of the Christian population and have historically played a pivotal role in establishing and nurturing these communities. However, women's experiences are frequently marginalized in ecclesiological discourse. In this paper, I bring Chinese Christian women's experience into ecclesiological reflection. By centering Florence Li Tim-Oi (李添媛, 1907-1992) as the focal point of the study and reading her autobiography, *The Raindrops of My Life: The Memoir of Florence Tim Oi Li*, as a theological source, I explore her self-identity, ordination, resignation, ministry, and experiences of suffering within her socio-political context, as well as her contributions to the church. Through this, I propose an embodied ecclesiology from Chinese Christian women's perspectives that reimagines the church as a community, where the dignity and agency of women are recognized, and where people find a space to survive and even flourish.

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Chinese Christian women, autobiography, Florence Li Tim-Oi

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The ordination of Florence Li Tim-Oi by Bishop Ronald Owen Hall (何明华, 1895-1975) of the Diocese of Victoria and South China¹ in 1944 marked a groundbreaking moment. Rev. Li became the first female priest in the global Anglican communion, but her ordination was controversial. A great deal was written about Bishop Hall's actions in 1944–1946, and much correspondence went back and forth. Rev. Li² was not directly involved in the controversy in the halls of episcopal power, but she gradually became aware that she was at the epicenter of a maelstrom. She decided to resign from her position as a priest on February 21, 1946, but she continued serving the churches in Hong Kong, Macao, mainland China, and throughout her whole life. Her ordination marks a significant milestone and has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Beyond her ordination, other parts of her life and ministry deserve attention and appreciation.

The Background of the Study

¹ The Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui (CHSKH, 中华圣公会, Anglican-Episcopal Province of China) was established on 26 April 1912 by the merger of the various mission activities of the Church of England, the Episcopal Church of the United States, the Anglican Church of Canada, and other Anglican provinces into one autonomous jurisdiction. At the Seventh Lambeth Conference in 1930, CHSKH was recognized as an independent province in the Anglican Communion. The Diocese of Victoria and South China was part of this province. The Anglican Church Hong Kong, Macao, Guangdong and Guangxi belonged to this diocese. Due to political changes in mainland China, CHSKH stopped its work in 1958. The Anglican Church in Hong Kong formally departed from the Diocese of South China in 1951, and the Diocese of Hong Kong and Macao (both Chinese and English) was established to continue the ministry of these two regions. In order to cope with the challenges and the new developments of the Anglican Church in Hong Kong and Macao, as well as to acquire a more formal institutional grounding, the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui (香港圣公会) was formally established as a Province on 25th October 1998. Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui now constitutes 3 dioceses (The Diocese of Hong Kong Island, The Diocese of Eastern Kowloon, and The Diocese of Western Kowloon) and 1 missionary area (the Missionary Area of Macao).

² After two years of ordination, Florence Li Tim-Oi resigned from her position as a priest due to the controversies surrounding her ordination. In this paper, I prefer to refer to her as Rev. Li in order to commemorate her priesthood and adhere to Chinese tradition. It is customary for Christians in the Chinese church to address her as Rev. Li.



The study of Rev. Li is often intertwined with that of Bishop Hall, who has been extensively examined through three monographs: *R.O.: The Life and Times of Bishop Ronald Hall of Hong Kong* by Rev. David M. Paton;¹ *The Practical Prophet: Bishop Ronald O. Hall of Hong Kong and His Legacies* by Moria Chan-Yeung;² and *A Study of Bishop R.O. Hall in China: Social Activist and Theologian* by Wu Qing(吴青).³ In these research endeavors, Rev. Li plays a peripheral supporting role in research dedicated to exploring the life and work of Bishop Hall. For example, in Chapter 3 of Wu Qing's work, she describes Bishop Hall as a missionary artist (传教士艺术家). Rev. Li is an example that highlights Bishop Hall's achievements and unique missionary philosophy in the pastoral care of the Church and the cultivation of Chinese workers.⁴

Existing research focusing on Rev. Li tends to emphasize her ordination as a priest and the influence of her ordination in Anglican communion, especially the hierarchical and patriarchal structure, church polity, and ordination procedures, often overlooking other aspects of her ministry and legacy. Rev. Li's biography, *Much Beloved Daughter: The Story of Florence Li Tim Oi*, was written by Ted Harrison, a British journalist and broadcaster. Harrison offers an outsider's perspective and frames Rev. Li's story in terms of ecclesiastical milestones and emphasizing her significance from the standpoint of the Anglican communion.⁵ In

¹ David M. Paton, *R. O.: The Life and Times of Bishop Ronald Hall of Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Diocese of Hong Kong and Macao 1985).

² Moria Chan-Yeung, *The Practical Prophet: Bishop Ronald O. Hall of Hong Kong and His Legacies* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015).

³ Wu Qing (吴青), *A Study of Bishop R. O. Hall in China: Social Activist and Theologian* (何明华及其与中国关系之研究 1922-1966)(Hangzhou: Zhengjiang University Press, 2017).

⁴ Wu Qing, *A Study of Bishop R. O. Hall in China*, 95-110.

⁵ Ted Harrison, *Much Beloved Daughter: The Story of Florence Li Tim Oi* (Wilton, Conn: Morehouse-Barlow, 1985). This book was published nine years early than Rev. Li's English autobiography, *The Raindrops of My Life: The Memoir of Florence Tim Oi Li*. That is one reason why people started to know her through Ted Harrison's work rather than her own autobiography.



his insightful article, “The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi: A Historical Perspective on a Singular Event,” theologian and historian Philip L. Wickeri attempts a historical reconstruction of the ordination and related events up until the early 1960s by drawing on some of the letters and other documents written by Li Tim Oi and others. From a historical lens, he situates Rev. Li within her historical context and offers a vivid, humanizing portrayal of her as a real person—a woman with her strengths, vulnerabilities, humility, and unwavering commitment to service. This humanizing perspective reminds us that individuals and their communities matter more than mere titles or offices.¹ Wai Ching Angela Wong’s article, “A Distinctive Chinese Contribution: The Ordination of the First Five Women Priests in Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui,” sheds light on the groundbreaking steps taken by CHSKH to ordain women as priests. Wong meticulously examines the lives of the first five women, Florence Li Tim Oi (李添媛, ordained in 1944), Jane Hwang Hsien Yuen (黃羨云, ordained in 1971) and Joyce Bennett (班佐时, ordained in 1971), Pauline Shek Wing Suet (石咏雪, ordained in 1973), and Mary Au Yuk Kwan (区玉君, ordained in 1977), who were ordained as priests in the CHSKH. Their ordination was not just an administrative change but a distinctive contribution to the Anglican communion.² By embracing love and equality, CHSKH pioneered a path that challenged traditional norms and paved the way for greater inclusivity. Many scholars have regarded Rev. Li as an icon in the movement for the ordination of women within the Anglican tradition. Kwok Pui-Lan situates Rev. Li’s ordination within the broader struggle for

¹ Philip L. Wickeri, “The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi: A Historical Perspective on a Singular Event,” in *Christian Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Wai Ching Angela Wong and Patricia P. K. Chiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 123-124.

² Wai Ching Angela Wong, “A Distinctive Chinese Contribution: The Ordination of the First Five Women Priests in Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui,” in *Christian Women in Chinese Society*, ed. Wai Ching Angela Wong and Patricia P. K. Chiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 129-153.



women's ordination in the Anglican communion.¹

Undoubtedly, becoming the first woman priest in the history of the Anglican communion is a profound achievement that casts her life in the light of legend. However, it is essential to recognize that less than four pages of her autobiography are dedicated to this remarkable event. Beyond the ordination, her entire life story, as narrated in her autobiography, serves as a way to inherit and express embodied truth. Rev. Li's autobiography does not focus on ecclesiastical controversies—such as church polity and structures—but instead narrates her faithful response to God's call, which shaped her entire life and ministry. Her narrative is not one of rebellion or activism in the traditional feminist theological sense. In her autobiography, she reflects a quiet but profound witness of faithful service shaped by context, culture, and urgent need, particularly during times of war and political turmoil in China. Through her life story, she demonstrates that women are both called and capable to serve the Church in diverse roles. At the inaugurating assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Amsterdam in 1948, in her presentation, "The Life and Work of Women in the Church", Sarah Chakko, a delegate from India, pointed out that the subject of women in the church was not only a problem of women, but also the concern of the church as a whole.² Indeed, how women respond to God's calling within the church is not merely a matter of individual vocation, but a reflection of the church's collective faithfulness to the Holy Spirit's work among all members of the body of Christ.

The Narrative of Florence Li Tim-Oi in Her Autobiography

Drawing from her own autobiography, *The Raindrops of My Life: The Memoir*

¹ Kwok Pui-Lan, *The Anglican Tradition from a Postcolonial Perspective* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2023), 171-173.

² Janet Crawford, "Women and Ecclesiology: Two Ecumenical Streams?" *The Ecumenical Review* 53, no. 1 (January 2001): 14-24.



of Florence Tim Oi Li,¹ we can gain insights into how she responded to her calling to serve the Church, and how she played her role in local churches and in the global Anglican communion. Rev. Florence Tim-Oi Li was born in the fishing village of Aberdeen on Hong Kong Island on 5 May 1907. She had five brothers and two sisters. Her father called her Tim-Oi (添媛), which means “much beloved.” When she was baptized, she took the Christian name Florence because her birth month, May, was a month of flowers and because she admired Florence Nightingale, ‘The Lady of the Lamp’.² Beginning with her studies at Union Theological College in Guangzhou in 1934, Florence Li Tim-Oi devoted her entire life to discerning and faithfully responding to God’s call to serve the Church. The joys and sufferings she experienced were deeply intertwined with her Christian faith and her unwavering commitment to the Church.

Ordination as a Deacon and Priest

Most studies regarding Rev. Li pay attention to her ordination as the first woman priest in the Anglican communion. The outside world undoubtedly sees

¹ As Rev. Li was getting frailer and aging, Edmund B. Der (谢博文), the Rector of St. Matthew and St. John Parish of the Anglican Diocese of Toronto strongly urged her to write down her story around 1990 and she completed 80000 words with some poems alongside her autobiography before her death. Her family asked Edmund B. Der to edit and publish in Chinese in Hong Kong and English in Canada. The first Chinese edition of Florence Tim Oi Li’s memoir, titled *Shengming de yudian: Li Tian’ai mushi huiyilu* (《生命的雨点：李添媛牧师回忆录》), which was published in 1993 in Hong Kong. A second Chinese edition was later released in 2010, featuring additional content such as the sermons delivered in her memorial service in Hong Kong and Canada, sermons commemorating the 50th anniversary of her ordination, and several photographs. The English version, *The Raindrops of My Life: The Memoir of Florence Tim Oi Li*, was published by the Anglican Book Centre in Toronto in 1996. In this dissertation, my research based on these two edition: *The Raindrops of My Life: The Memoir of Florence Tim Oi Li* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1996) and *Shengming de yudian: Li Tian’ai mushi huiyilu* (《生命的雨点：李添媛牧师回忆录》) (Hong Kong: Religious Education Resource Center, 2010).

² “It Takes One Woman: The Rev Dr Florence Li Tim-Oi” is a booklet that has been produced by the Li Tim-Oi Foundation in 2009.



the ordination as the highlight of her life, but her autobiography sees it as a short chapter in her life. On December 13, 1931, Janet Lucy Vincent,¹ a missionary from the Church Missionary Society, was ordained by the laying on hands at St. John's Cathedral by Bishop Charles Ridley Duppuy (杜培义, 1881-1944) as the first deaconess in the CHSKH.² Archdeacon Mok Sau Tsang³ (莫寿增, 1866-1943) preached at the service. His text was Romans 16:1-2, about Sister Phoebe, a deaconess in Cenchreae, one of the two ports in Corinth.⁴ Mok called on Chinese women to follow her example. In his sermon, he emphasized the leadership role of women in the church. In her autobiography, Rev. Li described the details. Mok Sau-Tsang proclaimed loudly, "Today, there is a British lady who is willing to proffer herself to the sacred office of deaconess in order to serve the Chinese Church. Is there a Chinese lady in the congregation to follow in her footsteps and commit herself to the Chinese Church?"⁵ Rev. Li was sitting in the front pew and listening intently to Mok's sermon. She was challenged by Mok's question deeply, and she knelt down reverently and responded to God, "I am here."⁶ To respond to the calling from God, Rev. Li left her job as an elementary school teacher and began to study at Union Theological College in Guangzhou. When reflecting on her decision to get theological training, she mentioned that,

I had never dreamed of studying theology to become a priest. At the time,

¹ Miss Janet Lucy Vincent (荣藉光), a Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary, had been a teacher at St. Stephen's Girls' College in Hong Kong since 1924. Learning of the Lambeth resolutions, she spoke with Bishop Charles Ridley Duppuy (杜培义, 1881-1944) in 1930 about the possibility of being ordained a deaconess to do the church's evangelistic work. She later formally applied to the Standing Committee of the diocese, and she was approved.

² Wickeri, "The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi," 109.

³ Mok Sau Tsang was consecrated as a bishop in 1935 and became the first Chinese bishop in the diocese of Victoria and South China.

⁴ *South China Morning Post*, December 14, 1931.

⁵ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 7.

⁶ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 7.



I had never even heard of women priests in the Anglican Church. I was seeking biblical knowledge only in order to serve the church in the areas that needed attention and to become a lay volunteer useful to God.¹

She took the same course as the male students, graduating in 1938 with full honors.² After graduating, she apprenticed in the All-Saints' Church of Kowloon, Hong Kong for two years and was trained to be an assistant to Rev. Tsang Kei-Ngok (曾纪岳).

In 1940, She was transferred to Macao. There were many refugees who fled to Macao from mainland China because of the Sino-Japanese War.³ This transformation was a big challenge for her. Rev. Tsang Kei-Ngok tried to persuade Bishop Hall to let Rev. Li stay in Hong Kong, but he failed. Rev. Li decided to obey this new direction. She said in the autobiography, "If this was intended for me, it did not matter whether I worked in the city or in the country. As long as I was needed, I would boldly go forward to accept the challenge."⁴ This statement highlights how her steadfast faith in God undergirded her pioneering service amid the social and political upheavals of early twentieth-century China.

The Anglican Church in Macao was built in 1938. Gambling, drugs, and prostitution were rampant everywhere in Macao. Despite the challenges, Rev. Li

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 8.

² Joyce. M. Bennett, "The Ordination of Florence Li (Li Tim Oi) to the Priesthood, together with the Subsequent Events as Told to the Rev. Joyce. M. Bennett in Guangzhou on Sunday 21st December 1980," 3. General Synod Archives in the Anglican Church of Canada.

³ On December 8, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, marking the outbreak of the Pacific War. At the same time, Japan launched an assault on Hong Kong. On December 18, 1941, Japanese troops successfully landed on Hong Kong Island. On December 25, 1941, the Governor of Hong Kong, Mark Aitchison Young, announced the Hong Kong's surrender. From that point on, Japan occupied Hong Kong until August 30, 1945, when Japan unconditionally surrendered, and Britain resumed control of the territory. During that time, Macao was colonized by Portugal, which was not at war with Japan. After Hong Kong was occupied by Japan, Macao became a center for refugees of many nationalities and was terribly overcrowded.

⁴ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 13.



chose to faithfully obey the diocese's decision and accepted the call to serve in Macao. This was a big responsibility because she would be the only Anglican minister in this territory. She worked with refugees, did evangelistic and educational work with young people, and sought government help purchasing rice for needy parish members.

After a year, Bishop Mok Sau Tsang suggested she should be made a deacon, and Bishop Hall concurred with this decision.¹ On May 8, 1941, the Standing Committee of the South China Diocesan Synod approved the ordination of Li Tim Oi as deacon upon receipt of a recommendation from the Church Council in Macao. She was ordained as the very first Chinese woman deacon by Bishop Hall on 22 May 1941.² In her autobiography, she only mentions in one sentence that she was ordained as Deacon in May 1941.³

¹ CHSKH was ahead of the Church of England in issues about women in ministry. The Lambeth Conference in 1920 decided that "the diaconate of women should be restored formally and canonically and should be recognized throughout the Anglican Communion." "The order of deaconesses is for women the one and only order of the ministry which has the stamp of apostolic approval." Deaconess can lead in prayer and exhort the congregation under license of the bishop. the 1930 Lambeth Conference proved resistant to further expanding their liturgical role, and emphasized the ordination of deaconess should not be combined with an ordination or priests or deacons. With the license of the bishop, the deaconess can instruct and preach, except in the service of Holy Communion. The proposed 1941 Prayer Book service for ordaining deaconesses omitted any mention of holy orders. The Fourth General Synod of CHSKH in 1921 changed the canons so women could be elected to the House of Delegates. At the Fifth General Synod in 1924, it was resolved that deaconesses should be included among the clergy. In China, deaconesses could preach and assist in the sacraments at church services. The deaconesses in CHSKH were clergy and could preach and assist in the sacraments. They would enjoy the same rights as male deacons. John L. Kater, "Stirrings: Emerging Women's Ministries in the Church of England and the Episcopal Church and Their Impact on the Chung Hua Sheng Kung Hui," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 88, no 4 (2019): 382.

² Ted Harrison, *Much Beloved Daughter: The Story of Florence Li Tim Oi* (Wilton, Conn: Morehouse-Barlow, 1985), 31. In the Church of England there were both deacons and deaconesses, the latter being a separate order for women. Florence Li Tim Oi, belonging to the CHSKH, which made no such distinction between deaconesses and deacons. She was ordained, and referred to herself as a deacon(执事).

³ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 14.



Since there were no priests in Macao, clergy from Hong Kong or Guangzhou would travel to Macao to celebrate the Eucharist on Sundays. With the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941, it became nearly impossible for priests from Hong Kong or Guangzhou to go to Macao. Bishop Mok Sau Tsang authorized Rev. Li to celebrate the Eucharist on the Easter of 1942, in order that a congregation of nearly 100 communicants might have regular sacramental worship.

Bishop Hall was visiting the United States during that time. When he returned to China at the end of 1942, he settled in Kunming. He could not go to Hong Kong because of the Japanese occupation. He heard inspiring reports about Rev. Li's ministry in Macao. By the middle of 1943, he had decided to ordain her as a priest for the emergency needs of the church. In the autobiography, Rev. Li's account is straightforward. She did not put herself forward for ordination. In December 1943, Bishop Hall sent a letter to Rev. Li, informing her that she would be ordained as a priest the following month, to give her the proper right to do ministry in Macao.¹ On 25 January 1944, Li was ordained as a priest in Zhaoqing (肇庆) by Bishop Hall.

In a letter to his friend Archbishop William Temple, written two days after ordaining Rev. Li, Bishop Hall outlined his main reasons for the decision. He argued that ordaining a woman as a priest was "less essentially irregular than that someone not in priest's orders should celebrate the Holy Communion."² Furthermore, he affirmed Rev. Li's gifts were "pastoral, both to men and women."³ In the course of her six years of work in Macau, she baptized fifty-nine children and ninety adults at Morrison Chapel.⁴ Bishop Hall reflected his decision to ordain Li as priest was "how God wanted it to happen."⁵

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 20.

² David M. Paton, *R.O. -The Life and Times of Bishop Ronald Hall of Hong Kong*, 130.

³ Paton, *R.O.*, 129.

⁴ Wickeri, "The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi," 115.

⁵ Paton, *R.O.*, 130.



When her friend Janet Lucy Vincent heard that Florence Li Tim Oi had been ordained, she was excited and wrote about this in a letter to CMS. CMS saw this letter and decided to suppress it at the time because they were afraid of controversy related to women's ordination as priests. In her letter, she mentioned,

I had long been sure that the Church in South China would recognize the Christian equality of men and women in this way but had not expected it to happen so soon. I do hope the House of Bishops will approve. It is such a blessing that such a suitable woman was available for the pioneer. She realizes her own weakness but rests on the power of God, and her development since she began her training to me is clear evidence that she was indeed "called by God" when she heard Bishop Mok's hopes for Chinese women leaders at my ordination.¹

After her ordination, Rev. Li returned to Macao and continued her work. At that time, many have viewed her ordination as a response to emergency need in the exceptional circumstances of the war. The controversy surrounding her ordination became more pronounced after the war ended. Rev. Li understood her ordination not as a path to the title of "priest" or even to make history as the first woman in that office, but as an act of obedience to God's call and a humble vocation to serve the people. Throughout her autobiography, she consistently underscored that she was simply answering God's call and seeking to embody that vocation in every aspect of her life. Because he ordained Li as a priest, Bishop Hall faced so much criticism and challenges from the Lambeth bishops and the CHSKH House of Bishops. Finally, Rev. Li decided to resign her position as priest in February 1946 and sent Bishop Hall a letter, stating:

According to the rule of the Anglican Church that there is no women can become an ordained priest, I think it is right time for me to resign, especially the war is over now. Actually, It is an old church prejudice, and I know that you are really wonderful and brave church reformer. Everyone also recognizes that you are a marvelous Church leader because you always try your very best to improve things exactly up to the very standard of Christianity. We pray that you must not resign because our Diocese needs you

¹ From Kunming, dated June 23, 1944, CMS Archives, ASE AL sec. 1-20.



very much. . . . Anyhow, this new rule can be passed sooner or later because women's movement becomes more active than before.¹

This heartfelt plea exposes the deep injustices women endure within church structures, while expressing a steadfast belief that genuine equality in ordination is imminent, promoted by the rising women's movement, Rev. Li chose to resign her priesthood before the church could formally dismiss her—doing so with unwavering hope and confidence in what the future holds. Following her resignation, Bishop Hall could continue serving as bishop in the church and permitted Rev. Li to work in the church although not as a priest.

In her autobiography, she mentioned she seriously thought about whether to step down or stay on.

When first told of this problem, I was quite perturbed. I gave serious thought as to whether I should step down or stay on. Through a moment of deep meditation in which I prayed for God's guidance and the constant working of the Holy Spirit, I suddenly saw the light. I realized that I should see my personal prestige as worthless for I was merely a small servant of the Lord. As the psalmist put it, "I am worm" (Psa. 22:6).

I voluntarily and whole-heartedly supported Bishop Hall in upholding his holy office as bishop..... I was willing to give up my title of priest, but I knew that having been ordained, I had to follow the order throughout my life. I had to follow the order throughout my life, I had to be obedient without minding small matters, serve the church with my best effort, free from secular care. This is my philosophy of life."²

Her speech at her fortieth ordination anniversary celebration in Toronto included reflections on her struggles and the controversies surrounding her ordination.

Shortly after my ordination to priesthood, I felt the pressure of opposition from the conservative Church of England leaders who were against the ordination of women. However, through the strength Bishop Hall and comfort given by God, I took that in stride and persevered happily at my

¹ Archives in Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Archives.

² Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 22-23.



post in the church for many decades, as if in a day.¹

Compared with Janet Lucy Vincent, Rev. Li was relatively passive about being ordained as a deacon and priest. Her autobiography shows that she never voluntarily applied to the church or the bishop for ordination. She simply devoted herself wholeheartedly to serving the church, submitting to the authority of the church and the bishop. The account of her ordination as a priest, along with the surrounding controversy over women's ordination, spans only three and a half pages in her autobiography, suggesting that she considered it as one part of her much broader story. When embroiled in controversies, she did not advocate for herself but championed the Church's interests and supported the bishop. Remarkably, even before the Church's official decision was rendered, she willingly relinquished her priestly title. In her autobiography, Rev. Li underscored her unwavering commitment to the Church, humility, and obedience in her own narrative. Nearly half a century later, her reflections on ordination as a priest and resignation appear more measured, rational, and thoughtful. This narrative also aligns closely with common storytelling conventions in the Chinese church—relying on God's strength to endure and persevere through difficulties, ultimately leading to victory.

On Ascension Day (May 30, 1946), Rev. Li celebrated her last Eucharist at Morrison Chapel in Macao. Later that summer, Li wrote to her friend Janet Lucy Vincent about the difficult situation she was facing:

I have decided to face every hard problem ahead. On Ascension Day, Bishop came to Macao and explained to the congregation about the uncanonical of the ordination of a woman as a priest. What a great shock to them! Since then there was a great reaction on the part of our Church members. They understood how hard for our Bishop, to stand for the bitterness therefore they were very sorry for him. On the other hand they noticed quite clear that the Bishop used to respect the people in the East as well as in the West. He shows no color line at all because he cares nothing,

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 52.



there is no woman priest in his own country, and he starts to procure one to serve God in the East. They said that he is really a Bishop with Christian spirit.

On the very day after the Bishop had gone back to Hong Kong some of the congregation came to see me particularly to comfort me. Some of the lady Church members came to see me with a sore heart and full of tears in their eyes and they raised many questions. They said that when Christ was in the world, he was very kind to women. Why the Church does not carry out the spirit of Christ? What does the Church represent? In the English history there were Princesses to be their monarchs. It will not take long for the Br. Empire is going to have a Princess to be their sovereign again. Why no woman can be ordained as a priest?

One of our girl choir members whose age is 13. When she took off her white gown after service she ran straight up to her mother and put the following question to her. Why does God make women? If women are made by God why can't they enjoy equality as men? Some of the ladies said that if the men think that women are unholy so that they cannot be priested if this saying is right we can say all men are coming from women so men are holy and women are holier. Since that evening there are many questions going to be raised. Now I shall have to solve these problems. Well, I must not relate so much about this matter. God's mills grind very slowly but they grind exceedingly small. Let us see what is going later on.¹

In her heartfelt letters to Bishop Hall, whether as a deacon or priest of the church, Rev. Li consistently prioritized the church's welfare and unity. In her autobiography, she saw herself as a small servant of the Lord and was willing to serve the church and God her whole life. Her personal feelings, emotions, and individual interpretations remained veiled. In her letter to Janet Lucy Vincent, Rev. Li emerges as both a woman and a friend, allowing her emotions to surface more freely than in her autobiography. The impact of her ordination reverberated profoundly within her congregation, particularly among women. These devout women posed probing questions and engaged in powerful theological reflections, and their faith and curiosity were ignited by Rev. Li's unique journey. These deep questions arising from the grassroots reflect the influence of a woman pioneer and role model and also serve as vital resources for the development of the church and theological reflection. After experiencing this upheaval, Rev. Li did not

¹ Li to Vincent (day unclear) August 1946, HKSKH Archives.



withdraw from the Church but continued to follow the arrangements of Bishop Hall, faithfully serving the Church.

The ordination of Florence Li Tim Oi as the first woman priest in the global Anglican communion was the dedicated effort of many individuals, such as Mok Sau Tsang and Bishop Ronald Owen Hall. Philip Wickeri describes the ordination of Florence Li Tim-Oi as a singular event.¹ Through this event, the solid patriarchal structure of the church was loosened by those willing to seek God's will and care for the needs of the people in the church. When Rev. Li was present as an ordained priest, it meant a lot for the church. Bishop Hall had been tempted to rename Tim Oi "Cornelia," because he saw the close parallel between the first baptized Gentile and the first woman priest.² She was exploring more space for women in the church. She once said that Christianity was the gift of the West to the East, and her ordination was a gift from the East to the West.³

In Mainland China

In 1947, Rev. Li moved to Hepu (合浦) in Guangxi Province to restart St. Barnabas Church, which had been suspended because of the Sino-Japanese War. In Hepu, Bishop Nelson Victor Halward (侯利华, 1987-1953) introduced her as a deacon to the congregation.⁴ On the eve of the Chinese Communist Party replacing the Nationalist Party (Guomindang 国民党) in charge of China, Bishop Hall

¹ Wickeri, "The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi," 108-109.

² Christopher Hall, "Thoughts at the First Ordination of Women Priests at St. Mary Banbury, Oxfordshire, on Sunday, April 17, 1994," *The Raindrops of My Life*, 99.

³ "It Takes One Woman: The Rev Dr Florence Li Tim-Oi" is a booklet has been produced by the Li Tim-Oi Foundation in 2009.

⁴ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 23. Even though Rev. Li resigned her position as a priest, Bishop Hall insisted that Florence Li still be recognized as a priest. In 1947, Bishop Hall asked the *Diocesan Echo* to publish the following: She is still a priest and always will be. No action of men can take away the gift of the Spirit for the work of a priest in the Church of God given to her by the laying on of hands in Zhaoqing.



encouraged the Church to make full use of their properties to establish schools and hospitals in order to retain the properties of the church and also demonstrate the proper attitude for the church of serving society. Following this strategy, Rev. Li and her colleagues worked very hard to establish kindergartens, primary schools, and maternity hospitals in Hepu.¹ There was a terrible tradition of despising female babies in Hepu. In the maternity hospital, they took the opportunity to educate the women to treasure their baby girls and told them Jesus loves babies of both sexes and that boys and girls should be given the same level of education.²

While working in Hepu, Rev. Li was given the opportunity to visit the United States with Assistant Bishop Halward in 1948 to learn more about other churches, especially the Episcopal Church. During this trip, Bishop Halward instructed her to keep her ordination as a secret and urged her to present herself as a deacon rather than a priest. However, when Rev. Li traveled around and was invited to preached in many churches, everyone knows who she is.³ Rev. Fran Toy, who would become the first Asian American priest ordained in the Episcopal Church was present when Rev. Li was in the San Francisco and was deeply inspired by her. She mentioned that Rev. Li insisted on being called deacon, which was highly controversial during her stay among the people who know she was ordained as priest.⁴

At the beginning of 1951, the churches, schools, and hospitals that were established by the missionaries in Hepu were closed. All kinds of religious activities ceased. In 1952, Rev. Li began to study at Yanching Union Theological

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 26.

² Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 26.

³ Joyce. M. Bennett, "The Ordination of Florence Li (Li Tim Oi) to the Priesthood," 7.

⁴ Rev. Dr. Paula Nesbitt interview Rev. Fran Toy in 2024. Thanks to Dr. Paula Nesbitt shared this interview record with me.



Seminary in Beijing (燕京协和神学院), where she was trained to better adapt to the new political and social realities of China under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party.¹

When she was in Beijing, she was identified as a spy (特务) and an accomplice of imperialism because of her close relationship with the missionaries, especially Bishop Hall.² She suffered a lot during this period.

Since I was unable to adjust my ideology quickly enough, I felt isolated and forlorn. Satan tried fiercely to pull me down to hell. Every night after supper, I strolled beside a lake on campus, appreciating the weeping willows and the songs of the slight yellow birds skipping from tree to tree. In comparison, I felt like a bird captured in a cage of political struggle, having lost its freedom, joy, and peace. During a moment of weakness, I thought of throwing myself into the lake and ending my miserable life.³

From the 1950s to the 1970s, numerous Chinese intellectuals endured great suffering and tragically chose to end their lives. Rev. Li's Christian faith gave her the courage to face these difficult situations.

A small voice reminded me that our physical form comes from God, and houses a precious soul..... How can we slight life? Can the soul be saved through suicide? Even a suicide of a layperson is a disgrace to God. How much more would the suicide of an ordained servant of God with a priestly office shame and despoil church? ”⁴

Although the Church of England and CHSKH refused to recognize her as a priest, and she subsequently resigned from her position as a priest, that small voice still identifies herself as “an ordained servant of God with a priestly office”.

After completing her studies in 1953, Rev. Li came back to Guangzhou and taught at her alma mater, Guangzhou Union Theological College, from 1953 to

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 28.

² Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 29.

³ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 29.

⁴ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 29.



1958. In the summer of 1958, the seminary students, pastors, and teachers left the city and labored on farms, such as rearing sheep and chickens and growing vegetables.¹ In 1960, she became a member of the History Writing Group, which was formed by the Three-Self Movement, and worked there until 1966.

She suffered a lot during the Cultural Revolution. Christians were seen as accomplices of imperialism because of their relationship with the missionaries. Countless individuals were subjected to struggle sessions and persecution. These sessions involved public criticism, verbal insults, physical harm, and even fatalities. All the churches and seminaries were closed. People were not allowed to talk about Christianity publicly. Most of the time, she worked in farms and factories, and she was not to be able to fulfill her calling openly.² She was afraid of consorting with those whom she knew were Christians lest she get them into trouble. There was no public worship, so Rev. Li went to a mountain to pray secretly.³

Li was born and raised in Hong Kong and came to Guangzhou and Hepu to serve the Anglican Church. Before 1951, People could travel freely between Hong Kong and mainland China. After that, the boarder was set between Hong Kong and mainland China, and people could not travel between them without the documents from the government. Due to the tightening political climate following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it became extremely difficult for ordinary citizens to obtain permission to leave mainland China. As a result, Li remained in Guangzhou for about thirty years and did not return to Hong Kong until 1981.

In 1979, as China opened its doors and strengthened its foreign relations, she

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 33-34.

² Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 37-43.

³ "It Takes One Woman: The Rev Dr Florence Li Tim-Oi" is a booklet has been produced by the Li Tim-Oi Foundation in 2009.



was invited to welcome foreign guests and teach English at an army medical school. However, she declined the offer, fearing that such a position might expose her to criticism during potential future political movements. Moreover, she believed that if the Church were to reopen, her teaching duties could conflict with her primary wish to dedicate her life fully to serving God.¹ She prioritized serving the Church in her life.

In Canada (1981-1992)

In 1981, Rev. Li left China to reunite with her family in Canada. Her life entered a period of harvest. In 1982, she settled down in Toronto. After that, she was appointed as an honorary assistant priest at St. John's Chinese Congregation and St. Matthew's Parish in Toronto,² until she died in 1992. She thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to serve the Church and the community life with the brothers and sisters in Christ. Canon Edmund B. Der (谢博文) described Rev. Li's service in the church,

She was very eager to serve the Eucharist and preach at least once a month in our Chinese (Cantonese) service, and frequently invited to give her testimony in many women groups...She was very serious in her role as a pastor despite of many lost years in the labor camp from 1951 on wards for nearly 30 years. So even in subzero weather she would lead a team going around door to door giving out leaflets for the neighborhood community. She was not biased on her role but courageously serve as a priest.³

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 42.

² Florence Li Tim-Oi (February 26, Commemoration) <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/resources/li-tim-oi/>. Canon Rev. Kenneth Kar Leung Fung (冯家亮) was the founder of Chinese Congregation at St. John's Church and worked as the church priest-in-charge until 1984. He mentioned this via email, "We persuaded her to stay, and with the commitment of one of the parishioners and myself and the help of then the late Primate, she was able to stay and become a Canadian citizen." After he retired, Canon Edmund B. Der (谢博文) was the successor and worked as the Rector of St. Matthew and St. John Parish of the Anglican Diocese of Toronto.

³ From my personal conversation with Canon Edmund B. Der on April 8, 2025 via email.



In January 1984, the 40th anniversary of her priest was celebrated in Westminster Abbey in her presence. In the same year, her status as a priest was fully recognized by the Canadian Anglican Church. Rev. Li attended the Lambeth Conference of the Anglican communion in England as an invited guest in 1988. She was awarded two honorary Doctor of Divinity degrees by General Theological Seminary, New York in 1987 and Trinity College, Toronto, in 1991. She was also very active in promoting women's ordination and empowerment in the Anglican communion, especially in the UK, USA, and Canada.

She was aware of the celebrations and accolades surrounding her and sought to remain as humble as possible in response. When the doors of Westminster Abbey were opened to her, she responded with a spirit of reflection and humility.

As the recipient of such honor, how could I be unmoved? Yet my enjoyment of such glory alerted me. I asked myself how a person as weak as myself could be worthy of such honor. I could only bow my head in penitence and earnest prayer and go through a thorough spiritual ablution.¹

Through her autobiography, Rev. Li's story is about how she responded to her calling from God to serve the Church. We can witness her commitment to the church through her own narrative, and see how she, as a woman, tries to create space for women in the Church. From the side of her narrative, we also see another aspect: how the church responds to women's calling to serve the Church. Throughout different historical periods and social contexts, women have received the calling to serve the Church. Yet all too often, instead of supporting their ministry, the Church, constrained by hierarchical and patriarchal structures—has acted as a barrier to their service. The denial of women's ordination is one manifestation of how the church exercises its authority to constrain women. In numerous other ways—both overt and subtle—it inhibits the development of women's full potential. Generations by generations, callings from God empower

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 55.



them to continue the journey to serve the Church and reimagine a church that can embrace women's calling to serve the Church.

In Rev. Li's autobiography, her deep personal relationship with God, the support of colleagues and family, the transformation of the church in women's ordination, and long-overdue recognition all allowed her to reflect on her past suffering with greater calm and peace. Her life story concludes with a sense of harvest, joy, reunion, and honor. Yet, as a church, we must not forget the suffering and oppression once inflicted upon women. These injustices must not — and should not — be allowed to continue.

The Legacy of Florence Li Tim Oi

With the support of so many family members, colleagues, and friends, the influence of Rev. Li is continuing. In 1994, on the Golden Jubilee of her becoming a priest, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan, launched the Li Tim-Oi Foundation in St Martin-in-the-Fields Church in Trafalgar Square, London. The vision of this foundation is "to equip women through educational grants in every Province in the Anglican communion to follow God's calling and to be trained for ordination and other ministries, leadership roles and professions." Since then, the Foundation has given grants to more than 750 women from 124 dioceses in 14 provinces of the Anglican communion, including Africa, Brazil, Fiji, India, and Pakistan.¹

In 2003, the Episcopal Church of the USA agreed to insert the Anniversary of Rev. Li's Priesting in the Church's Calendar of Lesser Feasts and Fasts - to be

¹ Li Tim Oi Foundation, <https://ltof.org.uk/> Rev. Canon Christopher Hall, the son of Bishop Ronald Owen Hall, is the honorary life president. "Around 400 women have been ordained as Anglican priests and others have been trained for positions such as adult literacy advisors, AIDS and trauma counsellors, bible teachers, chaplains in prisons, schools and hospitals, community, workers counsellors, evangelists, lecturers, microcredit treasurers, Mothers' Union development workers, nutritionists, peace and reconciliation officers, social workers, teachers, youth workers and many more."



observed on 24 January, which included an accompanying prayer:¹

Gracious God, we thank you for calling Florence Li Tim-Oi, much-beloved daughter, to be the first woman to exercise the office of a priest in our Communion; By the grace of your Spirit inspire us to follow her example, serving your people with patience and happiness all our days, and witnessing in every circumstance to our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the same Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.²

The Collect for that day is:

Almighty God, who pours out your Spirit upon your sons and daughters: Grant that we, following the example of your servant Florence Li Tim-Oi, chosen priest in your church, may with faithfulness, patience, and tenacity proclaim your holy gospel to all the nations, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.³

The Anglican Church of Canada in General Synod 2004 Resolution agreed to include Florence Li Tim-Oi in the Calendar of Holy Persons on the anniversary of her death, February 26. The explanatory note and background information state:

From that date until her death in 1992, she exercised her priesthood with such faithfulness and quiet dignity that she won tremendous respect for herself and increasing support for other women seeking ordination...The very quality of Ms. Li's ministry in China and in Canada and the grace with which she exercised her priesthood helped convince many people through the communion and beyond that the Holy Spirit was certainly working in and through women priests. Her contribution to the church far exceeded the expectations of those involved in her ordination in 1944.⁴

¹ The 74th General Convention resolved additional commemoration for including January 24 - Ordination of Florence Li Tim-Oi, First Woman Priest in the Anglican Communion, 1944 in the Calendar of the Church Year and authorize trial use for the triennium 2004–2006. The 75th General Convention in 2006 finally approved and entered in the Calendar of the Church Year and in future revisions of *Lesser Feasts and Fasts*.

² General Convention, *Journal of the 74th General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America*, Minneapolis, 2003 (New York: General Convention, 2022) 108.

³ The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Feast of Florence Li Tim-Oi, <https://www.lectionarypage.net/LesserFF/Jan/TimOi.html>

⁴ Florence Li Tim-Oi (February 26, Commemoration) <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/resources/li->



The Collect for that day is:

Loving God, giver of all good gifts,
fill us with your grace,
that we, like your servant Tim-Oi,
first woman to be ordained an Anglican priest,
may entrust you with our destiny.
May we, with her same forbearance in the face
of adversity, witness to you in all things.
through Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.¹

The prayer after communion proclaims, “Increase in us the virtues of patience and devotion that, like Tim-Oi, we may live always in your radiance”.²

The prayers and collects composed in honor of Florence Li Tim-Oi serve not only to commemorate her historical significance as the first woman ordained in the Anglican communion but also to articulate a theological affirmation of women’s full inclusion in ordained ministry. These liturgical texts highlight her forbearance amid adversity, underscoring virtues such as patience, devotion, tenacity and faithfulness. The recurrent invocation of these qualities indicates that the Church seeks to memorialize Rev. Li not solely as a significant historical figure, but as a model of Christian discipleship. Through this spiritual idealization, her life and ministry are presented as paradigmatic for both current and future generations within the community.

Rev. Florence Li Tim-Oi is commemorated in the Episcopal Church (USA) and the Anglican Church of Canada, not only as a person who inspires women in ministry, but also as a vital representative of Chinese, Asian and other minority

tim-oi/

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi (February 26, Commemoration), Added to the Book of Alternative Services Calendar of Holy Persons, General Synod 2004. <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/resources/li-tim-oi/>

² Florence Li Tim-Oi (February 26, Commemoration) <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/resources/li-tim-oi/>



communities within the Western Anglican communion. She, as an example, reveals the richness of God's church in gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Warren Wong, the cluster convener of Multi-Cultural/Peace and Justice in the Episcopal Church in the United States and one of the principal organizers of the evensong for the 80th Anniversary Celebration of the Ordination of Florence Li Tim-Oi in San Francisco, states that "after learning about the life and ministry of Li Tim-Oi, I thought, here is a person the church should be commemorating. Not only does she inspire women in ministry, but also Asians, Asian Americans, refugees, and so many others."¹ The Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Oregon, Diana Akiyama, the first female Asian bishop in The Episcopal Church, honored Rev. Li in her sermon in the commemorative Holy Eucharist to celebrate the 80th Anniversary of Rev. Li's ordination, "she represents to Asian women the promise and possibilities of God working in us and through us."² The Li Tim Oi Center was established in 2014 at Church of Our Saviour in San Gabriel, CA. It serves as "a model for other ethnic populations seeking to express their faith and serve their communities across local, national and global boundaries," and aims to "foster a culturally and linguistically appropriate program to meet the disparate needs of the Chinese ministry within the Episcopal Church".³

While Rev. Florence Li Tim-Oi is commemorated in the liturgical calendars of the Episcopal Church (USA) and the Anglican Church of Canada, her legacy remains largely unacknowledged within the Protestant Church in mainland China, where only fragmented references to her life and ministry can be found. In an article, Cao Shengjie mentioned her as an example to show that the women's

¹ Weston Curnow, "Anglicans Celebrate Florence Li Tim-Oi," *The Living Church*, January 30, 2024. <https://livingchurch.org/news/news-anglican-communion/anglicans-celebrate-florence-li-tim-oi/>

² Caleb Galaraga, "Diocese of New York Service Honors the Rev. Florence Li. Tim-oi, First Female Anglican Priest," *Episcopal News Service*, May 13, 2024. <https://episcopalnewsservice.org/2024/05/13/diocese-of-new-york-service-honors-the-rev-florence-li-tim-oi-first-female-anglican-priest/>

³ <https://zh.cosepiscopal.org/li-tim-oi>.



ministry in the Chinese Church has placed a longstanding emphasis on encouraging women to commit themselves to engage actively in various forms of church ministry as preachers, ministers, evangelists, and ordained pastors.¹ Gao Ying used her as an example to demonstrate that the Chinese church had already ordained women clergy long ago.² The Savior Church in Guangzhou continues to preserve a poem composed by Rev. Florence Li Tim-Oi, written as a reflection on her visit to the churches in ten cities of China in 1987. She was deeply moved by the rapid growth and revitalization of the church in China. Why did Rev. Li was not recognized within the Chinese churches? The main reason lies in the dramatic restructuring of protestant Christianity in China during the 1950s. After the Chinese Communist Party came into power in 1949, most of foreign missionaries were expelled. Three-Self Patriotic Movement started in 1951.³ Churches, which were originally established by missionary societies from different denominations, began to join Three-Self Patriotic Movement and hold joint service. First non-denominational, later post-denominational church was formed. Rev. Florence Li Tim Oi, as a figure closely associated with denominational structures and foreign mission work, was not been valorized. Rev. Li's story, rooted in a lifetime of devotion to the Chinese Church, deserves to be remembered—not only as a cherished legacy, but also as a lasting source of insight and inspiration for generations to come.

Reading Florence Li Tim Oi's Autobiography as a Theological Source

The genre of autobiography is a way to structure one's own self-awareness. In her autobiography, Rev. Li structures her self-awareness in a narrative form.

¹ Cao Shengjie(曹圣洁), "Huigu Woguo Jidujiao Funü Shigong Chuantong 回顾我国基督教妇女事工传统 (Reviewing the Tradition of Christian Women's Ministry in China), *Tianfeng* (天风), 7(1995): 9.

² Gao Ying (高英), "Yinwei Nimen Zai Jidu Yesu Li Dou Chengwei Yile (For You Are All One in Christ Jesu, 因为你们在基督耶稣里都成为一了)," *Tian Feng* (天风)7 (1995): 11.

³ Three-Self refers to self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating.



Narrative is a central feature of human experience. The human's memories are oftentimes preserved in the form of stories they tell and retell. By reading Rev. Li's autobiography as a theological source, I approach autobiography as theology. Such an approach not only offers fresh insights into women's experiences but also reveals how Li Tim-Oi's life story engages with and contributes to theological discourse, particularly within the field of ecclesiology.

Women's Self-Awareness

Through her own narrative in the autobiography, we witness how she constructs her identity and reflects on the deep sense of self. When reflecting from a personal perspective, Rev. Li often adopts a tone of modesty—downplaying her accomplishments and presenting herself with humility. Yet, when she views herself through the lens of faith—through God's eyes—she identifies as a servant chosen by God to serve the Church. This sense of divine calling empowers her to endure institutional pressures and to persist faithfully in her vocation.

When faced with the controversy surrounding her ordination, she turned to prayer and realized she saw her personal prestige as worthless for she was merely a “small servant of the Lord,”¹ quoting “I am a worm” (Psalm 22:6) to reflect her own understanding.² Li often describes herself as “weak,” a term she uses repeatedly throughout her narrative. She highlights her weakness in order to reveal God's power and grace. During her address at the 40th anniversary celebration of her ordination in Toronto, she reflected that, in preparation for her ordination anniversary, “I have discovered my many weaknesses, and it was

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 22. In the Chinese edition, she describes herself as “我只是上主之微小女仆而已” (wo zhishi shangzhu zhi weixiao nüpu eryi), which literally means that nothing more than the Lord's small female servant. *Shengming De Yudian: Li Tian'ai Mushu Huiyilu* (《生命的雨点：李添媛牧师回忆录》) (Hong Kong: Religious Education Resource Center, 2009), 59.

² Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 22.



through God's mercy that I was continually renewed in order to keep on witnessing for Him.”¹ After moving to Canada, she was the recipient of many awards, honors, and expressions of admiration. Yet in response to these recognitions, she often expressed a deep sense of unworthiness and inadequacy. In her autobiography, she consistently portrays herself as a humble figure by describing herself as small, weak, and insignificant. Those who knew her personally frequently attested to this quality, recognizing it as a defining aspect of her character.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Robert Runcie, sent her a greeting for the 40th anniversary celebration of her ordination in Westminster Abbey. In this letter, he mentioned, “You have never been eager to promote yourself, but only to build up the life of the church and serve its mission in places of desperate human need. Your selfless ministry is an example to us all.”² She reflects on this letter stating:

He wrote that he held my work in high esteem, and he praised my perseverance. He said that unperturbed by the church's oppression to the ordination of women priests, I had quietly devoted myself to serving the church without self-promotion and thus had set an example to others.³

This reflection also highlights the centrality of humility in her self-portrayal.

When faced with the struggles and controversies, she was willing to give up

¹ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 52. In the English edition, she uses the word “weak”. In the Chinese edition, she uses the word “weibu zudao (微不足道),” which can mean insignificant, negligible, inappreciable, and not worth mention. *Shengming De Yudian: Li Tian'ai Mushi Huiyilu* (《生命的雨点：李添媛牧师回忆录》) (Hong Kong: Religious Education Resource Center, 2009), 104.

² The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Robert Runcie, sent a letter to Florence Li Tim Oi to celebrate her fortieth ordination anniversary. This letter was read during the ceremony at the Fortieth Ordination Anniversary celebration in Westminster Abbey. *Shengming De Yudian: Li Tian'ai Mushi Huiyilu* (《生命的雨点：李添媛牧师回忆录》) (Hong Kong: Religious Education Resource Center, 2009), 1.

³ Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 53-54.



her title of priest, but she insisted on following the priestly order throughout her whole life, whether she had the title or not. She resigned her priestly title, but she did not resign her calling from God. When she faced the political struggles, she even thought of ending her miserable life. A small voice reminded her that “how much more would the suicide of an ordained servant of God with a priestly office shame and despoil the church.”¹ In this particular situation, she still identified herself as an ordained servant of God with a priestly office. In the face of challenges and suffering, she firmly believed that the strength from God enabled her to embrace them and move forward with confidence and determination. The divine becomes the foundation for her self-affirmation and empowerment.

Rev. Li's experience reflects that of many Chinese Christian women who, while lacking access to feminist theories and feminist vocabularies, still seek to discover their authentic selves and claim agency within the church. Rather than relying on external theoretical frameworks, they draw empowerment directly from their relationship with God. In her autobiography, Rev. Li frequently mentions a small voice from God that reminds, comforts, and guides her. It is through this intimate relationship with God and her deep attentiveness to the Holy Spirit that she discovers her true self, finds the strength to empower herself, and affirms her worth. The deep personal relationship with God empowers Chinese Christian women to find a subtle form to resist and subvert male domination in church and create a space to embrace their calling and achieving their own autonomy. They did not use Western feminist language or discourse but found an approach to speak for themselves.

In his book, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*, Cao Nanlai, a professor in the City University of Hong Kong, adds a significant gender perspective on Wenzhou Christianity.² He

¹Florence Li Tim-Oi, *The Raindrops of My Life*, 29.

² Wenzhou, located in southeastern China within Zhejiang Province, is often referred to as the "Jerusalem of



mentions that women far outnumber men in the Wenzhou church. Dominated by the male entrepreneurial class of believers, Wenzhou Christianity presents itself as rational, modern, and progressive. Christian women often undertake traditional female roles in the church, such as cooking, cleaning, and hospitality, as they do in the domestic space.¹ Wenzhou church generally perceives men as rational, engaging in systematic theological reflection, while women are seen as emotional, emphasizing personal experiences of piety and intimate relationships with God, especially personal encounters with the divine.²

Cao Nanlai describes the spiritual cultivation meetings in Wenzhou, where a female world of “emotion and ritual brings great joy, intimacy, comfort, and empowerment to participants and may even serve as a form of resistance against patriarchy by helping women oppose the pressure to fulfill masculine ideals.”³ Christian women’s practices of their spiritual power and intimate relationships with God enable them to gain spiritual authority and actively participate in certain public church activities. The church also esteems female Christians with spiritual experiences and gifts. This emotional, spiritual, and pious female sphere helps women resist the pressure to conform to the male will and serves as a form of resistance against male-dominated politics. It allows them to compete with elite men under the authority of the Holy Spirit.⁴ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, a professor Emerita of theology at Duke Divinity School, explores how feminist theology stands in relation to those women who remain within quite conservative Christian traditions and are not feminists or liberationist academics. She gives examples to show that women in the church use their loyalties to God to authorize

China.”

¹ Cao Nanlai, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). 98-99.

² Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem*, 101-118.

³ Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem*, 118.

⁴ Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem*, 118.



resistance to any male opposition that comes her way.¹

Women's Humility

Humility emerges as a defining characteristic in the self-image Rev. Li constructs in her autobiography, as well as in the ways she is commemorated by subsequent generations of the Church. Humility reflects not only a deep personal piety and spiritual virtue in Christian tradition—manifested through faith in God, submission to divine guidance, and the testimony of God's grace—but also resonates with traditional gender norms in both Chinese society and the Church. Within these contexts, female virtue has long been associated with quietness, modesty, and obedience.

Feminism highlights freedom, choice, agency, and empowerment, and encourages women to speak out, make their own choices, believe that they are good enough, and enjoy their lives, yet this worldview is at odds with the humility advocated in the Christian tradition. Feminist theologians have long critiqued the ways in which humility has been used to suppress women's voices and devalue their self-awareness. Valerie Saiving challenged in the 1960s the primacy of pride in the Christian account of sin, and suggested that women's sin is inordinate self-giving and loss of their unique self.² Saiving claims that selflessness and self-sacrifice have their limits: after all, if we surrendered ourselves completely, we would become a "chameleon-like creature who responds to others but has no identity of its own."³ Kwok Pui Lan argues that humility can be used to reinforce "a passive, docile and obedient attitude toward the dominant masters who came

¹ M. M. Fulkerson, "Changing the Subject: Feminist Theology and Discourse," *Literature & Theology* (10.2) 1996: 131.

² Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40.2 (1960): 100–112.

³ Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," 111.



to conquer and rule.”¹ Mary Daly implies that humility described as self-sacrifice, while upheld by ecclesial powers and politicians, is not practiced by those who exhort it. Rather, the deployment of humility fosters the “self-deceit” of those in power and furthers subjugation of those under them.²

Catholic theologian Julie Rubio suggests a way of bringing Christian tradition and feminist thought together in a complex, broken world and critically interpreting these concepts.³ From a feminist perspective, we can offer a corrective to the tendency toward excessive self-giving and surrender often found in the traditional Christian understanding of humility. From a Christian perspective, though, humility can be reinterpreted in relation to oneself, others, and God—without becoming lost in the false comfort of believing “I am good enough.” When we engage with the complexities of real life and adopt a more nuanced understanding of humility, it becomes a transformative virtue—one that enables individuals to recognize their authentic selves, to cultivate self-love, and to embrace their true identity. At the same time, humility can inspire self-giving in the pursuit of justice. “Being for others requires becoming oneself and vice versa.”⁴ Humility fosters the capacity to accept honor with grace and to confront imperfection with equanimity. We are not called to do everything, but humility helps us discern what God is truly calling us to do and to respond faithfully.

Embodied Ecclesiology

As the study of Rev. Li’s autobiography reveals, what mattered most to her was bearing witness to how God called her, how she embraced that calling, and how she responded to it faithfully throughout her life. As Lily Kuo Wang, an

¹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrims Press, 2000), 61.

² Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 101.

³ Julie Rubio, *Can You Be a Catholic and a Feminist?* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 29.

⁴ Rubio, *Can You Be a Catholic and a Feminist?* 23.



ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, claimed, “God’s calling is the most important thing. Women should become ministers and church leaders only because of God’s call.”¹ Women do not seek ordination in order to challenge the hierarchical structure of the church or its tradition of gender discrimination. Women do not become leaders or ministers in order to threaten men. “Women do not want to argue and fight about position and authority, but we women want to serve God fully, using all our talents and strengths.”²

When considering the church from the perspective of women's experiences, a central question emerges: how can the Church embrace women's callings, and what kind of church is willing to do so? A church that embodies God's truth within a broken world and cares deeply for those who live within it must recognize women's callings and affirm their work as integral to the mission of the Church. Such a church demands an embodied ecclesiology which proceeds inductively from lived practice rather than deductively from abstract principles or rigid doctrinal formulations. Ecclesiology based on abstract doctrines often reflect the experiences and interests of the ecclesial hierarchy, whereas ecclesiological understanding, rooted in grassroots experiences, creates space for the inclusion of marginalized communities' ecclesial realities.

An embodied ecclesiology emphasizes that the Church is not just an institution or set of doctrines, but is lived and experienced through bodies, relationships, practices, and presence. It pushes back against abstract or overly hierarchical conceptions of the Church. The Church becomes real when it is enacted in daily life, through service, suffering, worship, care, presence, and community. Embodied ecclesiology requires the Church to pay more attention to

¹ Lily Kuo Wang, “Ecclesiology and Women: A View from Taiwan,” in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella M.M. and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women’s Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1989), 31.

² Wang, “Ecclesiology and Women,” 31.



the people of God, rather than the institutional structure or principles. The structures and principles of the Church are means of governance. The ultimate purpose of the Church is to help people live out God's teachings and respond to God's calling in a broken world. Edmund B. Der claims that because Bishop Mok Sau Tsang and Bishop Ronald Hall "put pastoral care and sacramental nurture as quintessential for the refugee Christians," they make the history happened.¹ Wickeri concludes his article with this powerful reminder, "Florence Li Tim-Oi teaches us that the person—and her community—matter more than the institution or the office."² If the Church cares about the people and aims at people's flourishing in the Church, then the sufferings, joys, worries of God's people should be integrated into ecclesiology. Natalia M. Imperatori-Lee emphasizes that "by narrating the story of the church, rather than deducing its characteristics prescriptively from predetermined doctrines or abstract principles," we can build an ecclesiology that adequately represents the body of Christ.³ The story of the Church is the story of the people in the Church.

An embodied ecclesiology can play a crucial role in making women visible and heard in the Church and ecclesiological discourse. The visible presence of women in the Church has been a transformative force, often challenging traditional norms and paving the way for change. When women are fully present and heard in ecclesial life, the church moves closer to realizing an inclusive vision of community. When Janet Lucy Vincent was ordained as a deacon, Florence Li Tim Oi was present at the ceremony, receiving her divine calling in that moment. She subsequently dedicated her life to God and the Church. Rev. Li's pioneering ministry later inspired other women as well. Mary Au Yuk Kwan(区玉君) was

¹ Edmund B. Der, "Florence Tim Oi Li: Pioneer and Mentor of the Women Priests' Movement." <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/resources/li-tim-oi/li-tim-oi-der/>.

² Wickeri, "The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi," 123.

³ Natalia M. Imperatori-Lee, *Cuentame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 31.



born in an Anglican family in 1945. They were the members of the Savior Church (救主堂) in Guangzhou. After 1949, Rev. Li worked in that church. Mary recalled that even though everyone knew she had been stripped of her title, they called her Rev. Li (李牧师). Mary wanted to be a priest when she was young. Her father told her that women could not be priests. Mary thought to herself, “why can't a woman be a priest? I want to be a priest.”¹ When she called Rev. Li, she knew that women had the potentials to be a priest to serve the church. Finally, Mary Au Yuk Kwan was ordained as a priest in 1977. Similarly, the women in Rev. Li's own congregation in Macao were emboldened by her example to question why the church was not living out Christ's spirit of compassion and equality toward women. This breakthrough in CHSKH resonated far beyond the local context, influencing the wider Anglican communion. Over the ensuing decades, the Church of England, the Episcopal Church in the United States, and the Anglican Church of Canada all moved to ordain women to the priesthood. Meanwhile, within Chinese Christian communities, Florence Li Tim Oi's example continues to demonstrate that women were fully capable of serving the Church in this particular ministry. The voices of countless sisters—these still echo in different parts of the world today. The choice of Rev. Li to remain within the church and maintain her presence is a profound statement of resilience and hope. Her continued presence is a testament to their enduring faith and commitment; it symbolizes both resistance and the possibility of renewal within ecclesiastical structures. As theologian Natalia Imperatori-Lee argues, without the voices of women “one cannot claim to speak of the fullness of the reality of the people of God.”²

An embodied ecclesiology can embrace God's calling to women and demonstrate solidity to follow the Holy spirit's work in the church. Rev. Li received her calling from God through Bishop Mok Sau Tsang's sermon in the

¹ Wai Ching Angela Wong, “A Distinctive Chinese Contribution,” 129.

² Imperatori-Lee, *Cuentame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present*, 87.



ordination service of Janet Lucy Vincent as a deacon. Though Bishop Hall once describe himself as “99% a coward, and admitted he “hated disapproval of anybody,” he sought God’s will and broke all tradition and made history to ordain Florence Li Tim Oi.¹ With the invaluable contributions of Rev. Li’s younger sister Rita Lee-Chui and the son of Bishop Hall, Rev. Canon Christopher Hall, the Li Tim-Oi foundation was established and has continued to support women who need to be resourced to fulfil their vocations. The granddaughter of Bishop Hall, Rev. Frances Shoesmith lead the service for the 80th anniversary of Rev. Li’s ordination at St. Martin’s.² Countless efforts make Rev. Li’s story is heard in the Church now. As I put her in the center of my study, I see many people crossing races, genders, nations, generations to embrace God’s calling to women and following the work of Holy spirit. Many people worked together to make Rev’s Li’s ordination happened and make her legacy visible and alive today. As Rev. Dr. Paula Nesbitt states, Li Tim-Oi’s call to the priesthood and life of ministry teaches us that “a call is personal, but not solitary. For Rev. Li to fulfill her call, Bishop Hall had to be called. Our calls are linked to others.”³

Conclusion

Compared to many other studies on Rev. Florence Li Tim-Oi that focus primarily on the controversies surrounding her ordination, church polity, and ecclesiastical structures, this study centers on Li’s autobiography and its expression of her faithful response to God’s calling to serve the church that shaped her entire life and ministry. For Rev. Li, the divine calling, rather than institutional

¹ Edmund B. Der, “Florence Tim Oi Li: Pioneer and Mentor of the Women Priests’ Movement.” <https://www.anglican.ca/faith/worship/resources/li-tim-oi/li-tim-oi-der/>.

² Weston Curnow, “Anglicans Celebrate Florence Li Tim-Oi,” The Living Church, January 30, 2024. <https://livingchurch.org/news/news-anglican-communion/anglicans-celebrate-florence-li-tim-oi/>. Frances Shoesmith is team vicar at All Saint’s, Wigan, in greater Manchester.

³ Sermon by Rev. Dr. Paula Nesbitt at the 80th Anniversary Celebration Of the Ordination of Florence Li Tim-Oi in Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA on January 25, 2024.



recognition, was the most important aspect of her vocation. She embraced this calling with unwavering faithfulness, even when the church itself became an obstacle to her ministry. Her experience demonstrates how women, even without access to feminist theories or commonly used feminist vocabularies, can still seek to discover their authentic selves and assert agency within the church. Rather than relying on external theoretical frameworks, Li's empowerment was drawn directly from her lived relationship with God. Her story exemplifies an embodied ecclesiology, wherein the church is not merely an institutional structure but a lived, relational reality, shaped and sustained through the faithful responses of its members to God's call.

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