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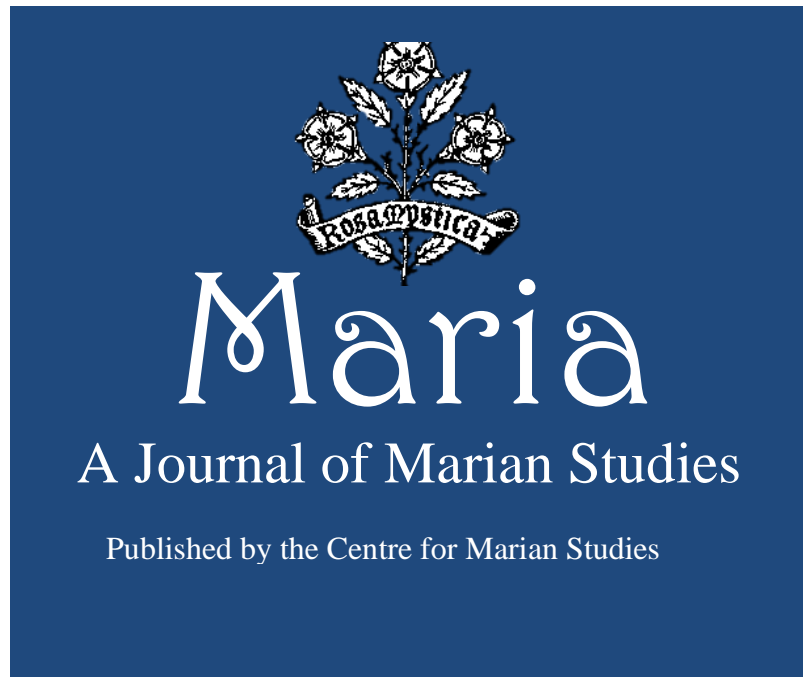
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**Abstract**

This article presents the ways in which a new Chinese religious movement, the Origin of the Self, perceives and theorizes the role of Mary. Established by Professor Zhang Bu Sheng in 2013 and headquartered in Singapore, this movement is present in Canada, Malaysia, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and beyond. Elaborating from Daoist and Buddhist traditions, but also from Christian, Hindu, and Muslim elements, Professor Zhang has developed the 'Wisdom of Life Three-Dimensional Evolution System' to achieve liberation of body, mind, and soul. Based on interviews and participant observations conducted in Singapore and online, this paper discusses the way the Origin of the Self approaches Mary, the one who meditated in silence and achieved a higher state of being. I argue that this case study not only highlights the role of Marian Studies for the understanding of multireligious Asia and Christianity but also demonstrates how the gender of Mary is not necessarily at the core of her cross-religious appeal. Questioning the gender lens of Marian studies, I highlight how non-Christian theological discourses about Mary are not necessarily focused on her maternity and gender identity.

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## Mary and the Origin of the Self

In Singapore, Mary is represented through numerous forms and surrounded by various devotions. Local Catholics have been promoting Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Our Lady of La Vang, and others. If this forest of Marian representations provides a rich tapestry to discuss the social, ethnic, spiritual, and ecclesial diversity of Singaporean Catholicism, we should nevertheless not assume that Mary is a Catholic reality only. In Singapore, as in the rest of Asia, Mary transcends religious boundaries.

In this multi-ethnic city-state of about 5.8 million inhabitants, Mary can be found in numerous places, secular or religious, Christian or non-Christian, and the cross-religious peregrinations of Marian devotions are diverse in nature. In the most famous church of the island, Novena Church, Mary attracts thousands of Christian and non-Christian devotees. This shrine is supervised by the Redemptorist fathers and stands beyond the direct management of the local archdiocese. Its religious appeal mostly revolves around the devotion to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the image of a Byzantine icon located in Rome, which attracts numerous visitors and pilgrims. Among these people, some do not identify as Catholic. They explain that, during their childhood, they attended a Catholic school and got in the habit of praying to Mary. The Mother of Jesus is a comforting and familiar figure whom they honor according to their own tradition. When these non-Christian devotees have something to ask or share, they stop by Novena Church. Among them, many are not Singaporean citizens. They are migrant workers who grew up elsewhere in Asia and who do not identify with a local parish. For them, the Marian shrine is a more convenient and central place for worship. Some of these migrant workers are Muslim or Hindu and they elaborate on cross-religious practices that they have learned at home. In India, for instance, Our Lady of Vailankanni attracts thousands of Hindu devotees who trust the efficacy of Our Lady of Good Health.<sup>1</sup> When these devotees move to Singapore, Novena Church can become an alternative place of Marian devotion. Similar dynamics exist among Muslims from Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> Used to visiting Marian shrines at home, they eventually continue to do so in Singapore. The cross-religious Marian devotions that one can find in the city-state of Southeast Asia are not necessarily a local exception. A significant proportion of them are informed by regional dynamics, cross-religious circulations, and inter-Asia migrations.

However, these devotions are not only happening within shrines monitored by the Catholic clergy. Sometimes, non-Christian movements can also integrate Mary into their pantheon and develop their own theology about her. This article presents and discusses one of these Singaporean cases. It focuses on the *Origin of the Self*, a religious teaching rooted in a Daoist worldview and worshipping Mary.<sup>3</sup> Elaborating on various traditions, this religious

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<sup>1</sup> Kristin C. Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin. Hinduism, Roman Catholicism, and Marian Possession in South India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Please see the discussion on priests and the Eucharist, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> Bagus A. Laksana, *Muslim and Catholic Pilgrimage Practices: Explorations Through Java*, Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> I, here, use the term 'worship' in order to underline the distinct kind of relationship that the Origin of the Self cultivates with Mary. Most Christians will not accept this term to describe their own relationship to Mary,

movement has attracted disciples and students from all around the Chinese diaspora, whether in East Asia, Southeast Asia, or North America. It worships a variety of deities and promotes techniques to cultivate longevity and achieve oneness.

For this new religious movement, Mary is especially important because her life echoes aspects of Professor Zhang's teaching. The mother of Jesus meditated things in her heart and did not die like most people. Subsequently, for the founder of the Origin of the Self, Mary illustrates the universal capacity that humans have to reach eternity through self-cultivation and meditation. The life and death of Mary stands as confirmation of Zhang's beliefs. The spiritual journey of Mary reveals how Christianity, a religion presented as linked to the developed and wealthy West, is in line with the core doctrines of the Origin of the Self.

However, while studies about Mary in Asia often highlight how her cross-religious attractiveness is usually linked to discourses about her gender – Mary a universal figure of compassionate motherhood – the Origin of the Self provides a different case study.<sup>4</sup> For Professor Zhang, the gender and maternity of Mary do not really matter. The fact that Mary was a woman and a mother does not really make a difference for her religious importance. What matters is that through her meditation and virtue, she engendered a divine being from within and overcame death. For the Origin of the Self, her achievement is comparable to what Daoist practitioners do when they achieve enlightenment and immortality. Mary illustrates the universal capacity that humans have to engender a higher being from within and transcend death. She manifests that Christianity, the archetypal religion of the West, is not in contradiction with the religious doctrine of the Origin of the Self.

The Origin of the Self provides, subsequently, a relatively distinct case study compared to most of the literature about Mary.<sup>5</sup> Often in more or less peaceful dialogue with gender norms and social codes of Western societies, vast conversations of Marian Studies remain heavily focused on sexual identities. In general, the female, maternal, and virginal aspects of Mary catch the attention of scholars interested in the study of Mary. Unlike what may happen with Paul the Apostle, the prophet Isaiah, or Francis of Assisi who are all important figures of Christianity, Mary and her devotees are heavily studied through a gender lens. Compared to Pauline Studies, Marian studies pay great deal of attention to the ways gender and sexuality are conceptualized and displayed.<sup>6</sup>

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some will prefer the term 'venerate'. But this paper seeks to precisely look at what the Origin of the Self does without projecting Christian categories.

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth introduction to this literature, see Francis X. Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Also: Deirdre De La Cruz, *Mother Figured: Marian Apparitions and the Making of a Filipino Universal*, Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See also Mary Ann Beavis, *Christian Goddess Spirituality: Enchanting Christianity*, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, New York: Continuum, 2003. But also: Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: a Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation*, New

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For instance, in her seminal study, *Alone of All Her Sex*, Marina Warner explores various attributes of Mary across time and space. She divides her manuscript through sections such as the virgin, the bride, and the mother. Social roles and norms guided by gender concerns were a structural category of this foundational study in Marian studies. But as Warner explains thirty years after the first edition of her book, this was ‘the work of a young woman absorbed in questions of sexuality, transgression and obedience, purity and pollution, far less interested in motherhood, or in grieving and solitude, ageing and loss’.<sup>7</sup> Yet, while concerns evolve, sexuality and gender remain.

In a more recent study exploring Indian women who claim to be possessed by the Virgin Mary, anthropologist Kristin Bloomer discusses the life trajectories and socio-religious backgrounds of these Marian devotees.<sup>8</sup> She explains that the institutional Church has conflicting views about them and the devotions they facilitate. Bloomer highlights that while the Church endorses certain forms of divine possession like those related to the *Alter Christus* priest presiding at the Eucharist, it appears more complicated to do so with women allegedly possessed by the Virgin Mary. If possession can be theologically acceptable for the Church, the gender of the involved parties matters.

In a different ethnographic context, Thien-Huong Ninh compares Vietnamese ways of circulating and venerating female deities in Vietnam and abroad (2017).<sup>9</sup> In this transnational investigation, Mary stands as one female figure among others. Ninh highlights how these religious figures are mobilized to not only protect but negotiate family structures and ethnic identity within various diasporic environments. Ninh explains that over the years the Virgin Mary has been presented in ways which are increasingly Vietnamese, wearing traditional clothes and hairstyle.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, her sexual identity has been reinforced – or at least highlighted. In contrast to certain discourses which downplay distinctions between men and women, Vietnamese representations of Mary remain shaped by gender concerns, a central category of their devotions.

Therefore, one must highlight that the gender focus of Marian studies is actually rooted in devotional practices and theological traditions of Christian networks. It is not simply an intellectual bias of scholars but a long-term tendency of Christianity. For centuries, Christian theologians and Church leaders have mobilized biblical material and sexual features of Mary in order to explain the unique nature of Christ and the Christian framework of redemption. For instance, during the patristic period, the virginity of Mary was linked to

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York: Continuum, 2002; as well as Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and Her Re-Emergence in the Modern Church*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Knopf, 1976. See also the 2013 edition, pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>8</sup> Bloomer, *Possessed by the Virgin* – especially the conclusion.

<sup>9</sup> Thien-Huong T. Ninh, *Race, Gender, and Religion in the Vietnamese Diaspora: The New Chosen People*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017 – especially chap. 2 on Our Lady of La Vang.

<sup>10</sup> Ninh, *Race, Gender, and Religion in the Vietnamese Diaspora*, p.74.

Christ's divinity. Highlighting the absence of sexual intercourse before the birth of Jesus was an important way to proclaim his divine filiation. Similarly, when the Council of Ephesus in 431 anathematized those who rejected the title of *Theotokos*, Mother of God, for the Virgin Mary, motherhood was mobilized to secure the unity of Christ's two natures.

Later, during the European Renaissance, European efforts to reform the Church struggled about ways to venerate and conceptualize the nature and role of Mary. For centuries, Mary became a major point of contention between European denominations. And in 1854, Pope Pius IX dogmatically proclaimed the Immaculate Conception of Mary, not only to clarify the nature of Mary but also to draw a modern line between Catholicism and Protestantism.

These theological, pastoral, and Christian concerns have shaped the practices of millions of Christians. They have also influenced scholarly debates and conversations about Mary. The study of Mary cannot easily escape from this Christian insistence on her sex and gender. Yet, as Marian Studies seeks to stand as an autonomous field of research and a body of literature able to go beyond Christian motivations, the gendered framework through which Mary is often approached needs more critical attention. Can Mary be more than her sex and gender role?

To explore this question, this paper offers a strategic detour through a non-Christian movement, the Origin of the Self Singapore. Its relation to Mary provides an alternative case study to rediscover this religious figure through a non-Christian angle. I first look at the socio-religious background of this new religious movement and its internal logic. Then, I explore the position that Mary occupies within the religious pantheon of the movement. Through this ethnographic detour, I show that other Marian attributes than her sex and gender can be central in the religious dynamics surrounding her, *id est*, meditation and immortality.

Data presented in this paper was collected in early 2023 through various methods. Most information was gathered during interviews with Professor Zhang and other established members of the movement. Additional observations were made during participant observations conducted at the Singaporean headquarters of the Origin of the Self, as well as through analysis of the movement's online presence. Finally, I also borrow material from publications distributed by the Origin of the Self and freely accessible to all. One must notice, however, that this paper does not provide a systematic ethnography of the vast and complex religious movement that the Origin of the Self represents today. Rather, this article primarily engages with Marian studies. Who is Mary for this religious movement? What are the specific rituals in which she is mobilized? Who are the devotees attending these rituals? Why does she matter to them? This article does not ultimately develop a systematic and in-depth analysis of the sociological background, ethical aspirations, international circulations, and economic flows of the Origin of the Self. After a brief overview of the movement, it focuses on discourses and practices related to Mary in order to specifically discuss the role that the

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mother of Jesus plays within this non-Christian organization. At the intersection of theology and ethnography, the article focuses on the liturgical and doctrinal roles that the Origin of the Self gives her. It discusses the religious agenda of the movement to highlight the importance of Marian Studies and the a-gendered way through which Mary can be integrated into a non-Christian religious movement.

### The Founder of the Origin of the Self

The Origin of the Self revolves around the person and teaching of Professor Zhang Bu Sheng (张卜生老师) who is presented as the guru of the movement. Professor Zhang is a Singapore citizen in his 60s who was born in China. He likes to explain that he spent more than 30 years studying ancient traditions in order to master Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian practices. Based on this journey, he has developed what he presents as the Wisdom of Life Three-Dimensional Evolution System which stands as his core teaching. In 2013, he formally established his own school: the Origin of the Self Singapore (OOSS 中华古文化传播中心)<sup>11</sup> and the OOSS Global.

According to the website, 'Master Zhang's expertise lies in his ability to unify ancient wisdom and integrate that with modern science – unravelling the secrets of human evolution'.<sup>12</sup> In his journey, Master Zhang explains that he has studied with more than 50 masters from various traditions. But unlike most Daoist or Buddhist masters, Professor Zhang does not wear a traditional religious robe nor a specific hair style. He has no long dress or specific outfit. He does not shave his head nor wear long hair tied into a Daoist bow. Professor Zhang wears casual smart outfits and has short hair, a physical appearance in line with practices of the middle-class men of his generation. According to some of his disciples, this relaxed appearance indicates his closeness and belonging to the lifestyle of the surrounding society. During interviews, several students spontaneously mentioned that they appreciate his proximity with modern life. His appearance makes him approachable. And indeed, Professor Zhang is an energetic man, eager to engage in conversation, and to spend time with people. He is not a distant and mysterious type of guru. During one of my first visits to the OOSS's headquarters, he was providentially present and did not hesitate to sit with me for more than an hour. He explained various facets of his teaching while someone was serving us tea as Chinese etiquette requests.

Standing as the foundation of the Origin of the Self, Professor Zhang is devoted to the delivery of his massive teaching about the body, mind, and soul, as well as to the guidance of

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<sup>11</sup> The Chinese name *Center for the Diffusion of Ancient Chinese Culture* is clearly not the mere transliteration of the English name, Origin of the Self. Rather, it indicates another layer of efforts to shape the identity of the movement across different cultural environments. Still, since this article seeks to primarily engage with Marian Studies, I will not deploy a systematic analysis of these multiple names.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.originofself.com/en/zhangbusheng/> (visited 12 Sept. 2023).

numerous rituals and retreats in Singapore and abroad. Hence, he has traveled extensively and gathered hundreds of students and disciples around the world. Most of them identify as ethnically Chinese and live in countries with an important Chinese diaspora. During the past ten years (2013-2023), the Origin of the Self has become an international organization committed to the promotion of Professor Zhang's teaching. As the website of the movement highlights, the guru has been recognized as a religious master and invited to various international events about contemporary Daoism. As an additional sign of this public recognition, the late Mr. Lee Khoo Choy, Singapore's Founding Minister of State for Culture, described Professor Zhang as a National Treasure.

### Introducing the religious teaching and practices of the Origin of the Self

According to Professor Zhang and his Wisdom of Life Three-Dimensional Evolution System, Western and Eastern traditions revolve around the same universal principles and share similar understanding of the cosmos and humankind. The world is made of a set of universal core components. Humans live in a continuum with the cosmos and can cultivate self-actualization through various technics. As we will see below, the teaching of the Origin of the Self is translated into numerous rituals and bodily practices which all converge toward the full sanctification and divinization of the self. 'Using this three-dimensional culture system, practitioners are free to adjust the code of body, mind and soul, unravel the inner trappings and ultimately achieve liberation of body, mind and soul to lead wise, healthy, successful lives.'<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1. Website of the OOSS with Professor Zhang

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.originofself.com/en/about-us/> (visited 5 July 2023).

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Subsequently, Professor Zhang emphasizes that his doctrine is more than knowledge. Through ritualized forms of devotions, his teaching aims at the spiritual transformation of the believer in order to reshape personal and social realities. To reach the full divinization of the self, the movement teaches five types of practices, labelled as Five Transcendental Arts:

- Arts of medical treatment: a set of practices which combine both traditional Chinese medicine and Daoist arts of medical treatment.
- Arts of divination: techniques which seek to develop a 'supernormal astral body' which, according to the movement, can gather energy to allow one's mind to traverse worldly and other-worldly realms.
- Arts of physiognomy: practices which aim at locating energy vortices on earth that the movement also named 'Dragon Meridians', in order to transform a residence or a workspace into something described as a field of radiant and positive energy. Feng Shui, a Chinese art identifying energy flows within a living space, is part of these arts of physiognomy.
- Astrology and astral studies: this set of techniques explores the physiological impacts and psychosomatic effects of the external celestial bodies on people who live on earth.
- Arts of self-perfection: a series of practices and elixir cultivations developing various alchemical arts of immortality.

Through these practices delivered during various courses, short workshops, and several-day retreats in the mountains of Europe, Canada, or Malaysia, students can learn how to transform themselves and acquire wisdom to transmute their ills and misfortunes. To describe this state of being, Master Zhang says, 'Once you get there, you will know all the other great sages of the past were simply doing the same, sharing truths not of their own creation or perception, but simply revelations they received as they walked the path. It isn't philosophy, it isn't renaissance art, it isn't self-creation, it simply is absolute truth transmitted as it is.'<sup>14</sup>

In addition to these educational practices centered on the discipline of the self, the OOSS also provides various services and rituals that disciples and students can purchase. For instance, those seeking religious retreat can rent chalets in British Columbia.<sup>15</sup> Students can also give donations for the monthly recitations of collective prayers in Singapore and throughout other temples of the network. Additionally, these venues provide the possibility of buying and disposing of all-year ancestral tablets for deceased family members. Through the purchase of specific candles, disciples can make light offerings and/or buy paper offerings to burn. Inside the eternal ancestral hall of Singapore, students of Professor Zhang are able to rent a space to put a family ancestral tablet.

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.originofself.com/en/zhangbusheng/> (visited 12 Sept. 2023).

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.originofself.com/en/canada-chalet/> (visited 12 Sept. 2023).



## The Multidimensional presence and International Network of the OOSS

In Singapore, the headquarters of the OOSS are located within an industrial building of the East coast.<sup>16</sup> The organization does not own a temple of a traditional Chinese appearance erected on an independent plot of land. Rather, it occupies six different sections within an industrial building where dozens of secular companies are also operating. The main office of the OOSS is on the seventh floor of the building. Several rooms are devoted to administrative purposes and teaching. There is also a small chapel (堂) with statues of all the deities honored by the OOSS. On the fourth floor, there is a large Taishang Xuanling Buddhist Shrine where students and disciples can burn offerings and perform devotions quite typical of Chinese popular religion.

Like the physical appearance of Professor Zhang, the location and layout of the headquarters speak about the kind of positionality that the OOSS wants to occupy in Singapore and within the Sinophone world. As a syncretic and transnational network, the Origin of the Self is both a quite typical Chinese religious movement of the kind that Chinese popular religion generates constantly, and also a rather distinct one.<sup>17</sup> Like numerous other Chinese religious traditions, it does not perceive itself as something distinctively religious.<sup>18</sup> Rather, its location underscores its multidimensional nature and how it does not necessarily oppose the secular to the religious. Its premises, even its space of worship, stand next to companies specialized in industrial design, trade, or packaging. Furthermore, the nature and the number of rooms that the OOSS occupies illustrate the scope of its activities and its financial capacities. In its classrooms and in its worship rooms, the syncretic movement is both about formal learning and ritual performances. And this multidimensional reconfiguration of Chinese traditions attracts enough interest and financial support from local devotees that the OOSS can rent numerous rooms in this large industrial complex.

But the OOSS goes beyond Singapore.

[Professor Zhang] travelled extensively to the Western world in a quest to deepen his understanding of their various spiritual practices, including that of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. These travels had taken him even to places like Egypt and Greece, which all confirmed something he had already innately known – that whatever inner teachings there were in the Eastern tradition which could lead one to sanctification, the Western tradition had as well.<sup>19</sup>

The transnational nature of the movement is not only about the global religious quest of Professor Zhang. It is also about the origin of the students and disciples of the OOSS, as well

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<sup>16</sup> The exact address is 10 Ubi Crescent, Ubi Techpark Lobby, E #07-86 S408564.

<sup>17</sup> David A. David, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Sébastien Billioud, *Reclaiming the Wilderness*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.originofself.com/en/zhangbusheng/> (visited 12 Sept. 2023).

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as about the religious practices they are invited to embark on. Professor Zhang often brings students and disciples who have the financial capacity to attend training sessions and retreats in various parts of the world such as Canada, Egypt, Japan, Europe (Alps and Greece), and Malaysia. These guided retreats are usually occurring in outstanding natural environments where practitioners are invited to reconnect with world geo-meridians in order to re-engineer their lives.

Over the years, Professor Zhang has attracted students from various parts of the world – most of them claiming a Chinese ethnicity and embodied in the transnational Chinese diaspora. Through the long-term goal of establishing more than 300 branches worldwide, the OOSS already has a stable presence in countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong (China), Canada, and the United States of America. To maintain communication and visibility, each of these locations has its own Facebook page and WhatsApp groups which present and share its local activities to domestic and international students. Currently, the OOSS Global seeks to strengthen its presence in countries like Indonesia, Thailand, India, Japan, Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, France, Italy and more.<sup>20</sup>

While all those branches combined together made up a few thousand students and disciples, the Wisdom Academy is the overarching umbrella which displays and diffuses standardized material that present the teaching and practical guidance of Professor Zhang.<sup>21</sup> Through a website, imprints, and DVDs, the Wisdom Academy produces multimedia products to explain the various components of the Three-Dimensional Wisdom of Life System.

This material is mostly in simplified Chinese, which suggests that the targeted audience is mainly made up of ethnic Chinese people who have a rather strong connection to their ancestral language. Yet, this does not mean that the Origin of the Self is limited to the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Singapore, nor to new Chinese migrants. It has been able to connect with a wide range of people who relate to the Chinese diaspora. From a sociological perspective, the OOSS is a Chinese diasporic religion which operates mostly through Chinese language even though there is a systematic effort to translate material and teaching into English. From a religious studies perspective, it is an offshoot of Daoism and Chinese popular religions, infused by an entrepreneurial mindset and cooperative culture. The Origin of the Self has evolved into a multidimensional and international network supporting the spread of Professor Zhang's teaching. Today, the movement engages in business activities such as real estate, renovation, lighting, healthcare, tourism industry, public welfare and charity. Like other new Chinese religious movements, the OOSS is a highly heterogeneous network with religious and commercial facets, based in Singapore but operating through the Chinese diaspora and spreading across several continents.

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<sup>20</sup> See [https://www.oossglobal.com/about\\_us](https://www.oossglobal.com/about_us) (visited 12 Sept. 2023).

<sup>21</sup> See <https://www.oossglobal.com/> (visited 12 Sept. 2023).

With this overview in mind, we can now turn our focus toward the position and religious significance that the Origin of the Self gives to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

### The Virgin Mary within the Origin of the Self – Theory and Practice



Figure 2. Professor Zhang at the Chapel of the headquarters

As one can observe within the small chapel of the OOSS's headquarters, the Virgin Mary is one of the various sages that the movement worships. With Joseph and Jesus, she is represented by an image and a statue on the right side of the altar. The entire platform is covered with statues of gods and religious symbols representing Daoist, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim traditions. The left side of the altar is mostly occupied by objects related to Hindu and Tantric traditions. Chinese and Daoist symbols stand in the center. And what are described as Western traditions (Christianity, Islam, etc.) are located on the right side of the platform. The whole setting is a cosmology in itself where traditions and religious figures fit into the universalist teaching of Professor Zhang.

The presence of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary signals that Christianity is not a contradiction to the OOSS religious worldview. Rather, Professor Zhang explains that Christianity confirms the universal truth of his doctrine and religious practice. According to him, there are many Christian elements and stories which ultimately illustrate what the OOSS teaches. 'In the Bible, there is a saying of walking into the house of the Lord. The house of the Lord is our own

body.<sup>22</sup> Professor Zhang is indeed referring to 1 Cor. 3:16,<sup>23</sup> a sentence in which the apostle Paul describes the human body as the temple of God. According to Professor Zhang, this biblical statement means that the divine is within each of us; and our body is the way to cultivate this unlimited presence. In other words, Christianity and Daoist traditions teach the same universal principle about humankind.

To further highlight the convergence of Christianity and the OOSS, Professor Zhang does not hesitate to mobilize Christian scriptures, Christian arts, and church architecture. According to him, these Christian elements speak about the inner mechanism of the body, mind, and soul and ultimately support the doctrine of the OOSS. For instance, in the various courses provided by the Wisdom Academy, there is one 12-hour course focusing on Christianity itself. In the video analyzing architecture patterns found within European and Russian churches, Professor Zhang shows that the same structuring principles about the inter-relations between the cosmos and the body are displayed throughout ancient and medieval Christian churches. Following universal structures that shape the broader cosmos, Christian places of worship become a microcosmos to nourish and regenerate the self of a worshiper.

In these efforts to integrate Christianity within the universal claims of the OOSS, I want to highlight that Mary plays a significant role. Unlike Joseph, who easily disappears from the discourse and practices of the Origin of the Self, Mary is systematically mobilized during celebrations related to Christian festivals. As mentioned during interviews with Professor Zhang, Mary exemplifies how the cultivation of oneself leads to a higher state of being and a divinization of the self. As the Christian scriptures say: 'Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them.' (Lk. 2:19 (Christian Standard Bible)). According to the guru of the movement, Mary is the one who contemplates, meditates in her heart, gives birth to a higher being, and does not go through death like most people do. For the Daoist master, the Bible shows that she was practicing visualization and meditation in her own body to the point of generating – without intercourse – a new divine being. She gave birth to a higher being not because of the action of a genitor but because of her capacity to meditate. Like Siddhartha Gautama, Laozi, and other sages of ancient times, she embodied and revealed the spiritual potential of humankind. And in some sense, for the OOSS, I argue that Mary is more important than Jesus.

But this Daoist teaching on Mary is more than a theoretical doctrine. It also involves ritualized practices and devotions. During large Christian festivals like Christmas and Easter (public holidays in Singapore), the OOSS makes offerings to Mary and Jesus – the two Christian sages who reached divinization of the self. Twice a year, a table is set within the headquarters

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<sup>22</sup> Booklet diffused by the OOSS, *Unravel the Secret Codes of Mind, Body, and Soul Transcend the Boundaries of Convention*, p. 47 (no year available).

<sup>23</sup> 'Don't you yourselves know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God lives in you?' - 1 Cor. 3:16 (Christian Standard Bible).



of the movement and features the statues of Jesus and Mary. In front of these statues, various fruits, paper money, and burning incense are displayed to honor the two Christian figures.

One must notice, however, that these rituals do not attract as many people as other *puju* and major rituals of the OOSS. These Mary-related rituals are mostly organized and performed by the staff of the headquarters. During interviews with members of the organization, students and disciples did not seem to personally relate to Mary and Jesus. They would not mention them during our conversations, nor spontaneously indicate any devotion to them. When I specifically interrogated them on this, reactions were rather mixed. Interviewees did not have specific things to say about Mary and Jesus. They almost seemed embarrassed and quickly moved to another topic. Some invited me to question Professor Zhang on this instead of them. Therefore, I argue that the presence of these two figures is not something central in their engagement with the OOSS nor in their practice of meditation. Indeed, ceremonies organized for the anniversaries of other deities are much better attended than Christmas and Easter. In other words, Mary and Jesus are not necessarily the most popular deities of the OOSS.

Nonetheless, Mary and Jesus are part of the official teaching and liturgical performance of the movement. The Origin of the Self does not hesitate to use its Facebook Channels to publicize the Christmas and Easter offerings that Professor Zhang brings to these two Christian sages. Mary and Jesus may not be popular among students and disciples but they remain a legitimate part of the movement. At theological and practical levels, Mary and Jesus are an official piece of the OOSS religious puzzle. They are not a mere decoration or a discursive statement. They are mobilized during formal rituals, publicized offerings, and encouraged devotions that constitute the movement.

Yet, as mentioned earlier, Mary is not simply as important as Jesus. Mary has a special importance on her own. For this Daoist movement, she is the one who initiated the whole process of divinization that the Christian Bible describes. In other words, the resurrection is something primarily rooted in Mary herself. She may come from a long Judaic tradition, but she has been able through her own virtue to re-invigorate it and meditate to the point of transforming her own body. It is her virtuous practices and meditation which not only allowed her to transcend death but also to give birth to another divine being. For Professor Zhang, Mary is the key to understanding the universal teaching about humankind that Christianity and Judaism reflect. These Western traditions are fundamentally about the divinization of the self, and the virtuous and meditative Mary performed that.

During our interview, Professor Zhang openly criticized Protestant movements which have, according to him, lost connection with Mary, and therefore, with the ultimate truth of the Christian faith. For the Origin of the Self, Christianity cannot be fully understood without the example of Mary. Protestants have lost something essential. In the promotional material diffused by the Origin of the Self, the movement mostly focuses on Christian elements coming

from Orthodox, Catholic and Eastern traditions. Protestantism is marginal. According to Professor Zhang, the lack of great architectural accomplishment among Protestant Churches is a sign of this spiritual disconnection and decline, a downfall that is typical of most religious movements when they ultimately forget the core principles about the mind, body, and soul.

### **Conclusion: Marian Studies and Gender Studies**

In conclusion, the Origin of the Self is an important object of study because it sheds light on two significant aspects of Marian Studies in Asia. First of all, with the Origin of the Self, we see how the study of Mary herself is essential to understanding the ways in which a new Daoist movement integrates Christianity within its religious teaching. For this religion of the Chinese diaspora, Christianity is not simply about Jesus, the Trinity, or the West. Christianity must be understood through the figure of Mary. Therefore, a systematic study of her theological role and socio-religious position is essential to understanding the interreligious nature of this new Daoist movement.

Second, the Origin of the Self illustrates that the study of Mary within an interreligious context is not necessarily related to the question of gender.<sup>24</sup> While numerous studies of Marian devotions across religious traditions have highlighted the importance of Mary's gendered identity (Mary as a female symbol; Mary as a loving and protective mother; etc.),<sup>25</sup> the Origin of the Self provides an alternative case study. For this Singapore-based religious movement, the fact that Mary was a woman and a biological mother does not really matter. What matters is that Mary practiced virtue and meditated in her heart to the point of reaching a new state of being. She could have been a man, like Jesus, and would deserve the same reverence and devotion. Even when the Origin of the Self reflects on the birth of Jesus, the focus is not on biological maternity but on the potential that the human mind and soul have over the body to generate a new kind of being. The virginity of Mary is revisited in an a-gendered way. She has been able to give birth to another deity because of her virtue and meditation. Mary is not presented as a devoted and loving mother, and the reverence of the OOSS toward Mary is not strictly linked to her gender but to her spiritual achievement. For this Chinese-Daoist movement, reaching divination is not something male or female. As Buddhist and Daoist traditions teach, it is a universal capacity that all humans have. And like Laozi and Gautama Siddhartha in their time, it is what Mary manifests.

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<sup>24</sup> See Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother* and De La Cruz, *Mother Figured*.

<sup>25</sup> See Beavis, *Christian Goddess Spirituality*.