

The Reception of The Bible in Chinese Literature of the Twentieth Century and the Indigenous Critical Response

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In the years 1995–2000, according to my knowledge, six Chinese books appeared in the PRC and one outside of it, analyzing the reception, and to some extent, also the *Wirkung*, or *fortune*, as the literary comparatists use to say, of the *Bible* (and Christianity in general) in modern Chinese creative and critical literature. The pioneering work of Lewis S. Robinson *Double-Edged Sword. Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction* from the year 1986, found its follower in a young, but courageous scholar Ma Jia (* 1962), who, together with his mentor, my friend Professor Ye Ziming (1935–2005), was the first to dare in the atheist atmosphere of his country to point out the concrete traces of impact of the *Bible* on the Chinese literature of the first half of the twentieth century. The process was long and troublesome, but in 1995, after years of rejection of the manuscript, his book appeared in Shanghai (Ma Jia, 259–260). Three years before, in 1992, Robinson's book was published, on the initiative of the old writer Xiao Qian (1910–2000), in the translation of Xiao's student Fu Guangming (*1965) and Liang Gong, for obvious reasons not in the PRC,

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but in Taiwan (Fu Guangming, Liang Gong).

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Ma Jia's monograph *Shizijia xiade paihui. Jidu zongjiao wenhua he Zhongguo xiandai wenxue (Wandering Under the Cross. Christian Culture and Modern Chinese Literature)* was not the first swallow of critical appreciation of the impact of the *Bible* on modern Chinese literature, but the first systematic treatment of the subject after the first attempts by Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967) and Zhu Weizhi (1905-1999).

At the beginning of his book Ma Jia claimed the following:

“Modern Chinese writers at the beginning of the 20th century, took a reluctant attitude towards Christian culture, which had only recently entered their field of vision. Therefore, their state of mind and response toward Christian culture was more subtly complicated than their response to the Western cultural forms and philosophies. On one hand, they both needed and demanded the values of Christianity, while on the other hand, they tried their best to avoid or to negate its substance form and some of its doctrines. They never treated Christianity as enthusiastically as they embraced Greek culture. There was always an invisible wall between Christianity and modern Chinese writers. This was, to a certain degree, an inevitable result because the descendants of a country that had no sense of God, could not imagine that the spirit or religion is no less strong than the reason of science” (Ma Jia, 1-2).

Notwithstanding, the Chinese writers, more than the scholars or philosophers, were curious about Christianity and mostly about the *Bible*,

which was usually the most important source of their new knowledge.

Modern Chinese intellectuals embraced Euro-American Christian culture during the literary revolution coming with the May Fourth Movement 1919, although some, like Wang Guowei (1877-1927) (Rickett, 46) and Lu Xun (1881-1936) were informed about it earlier (Lu Xun). The impact of the *Jiu xin yue quanshu. Guanhua hehe yiben* (*The Old and New Testament of the Bible. Mandarin Union Version*), published in 1919, became for many Chinese intellectuals, and not only the writers, the ABC of modern Chinese language in the vernacular and one of the inspirations of lasting value (Zhou Zuoren 1921, Zetzsche).

It is true that the enthrallment with the *Bible* and Christianity started to wane away very soon in 1922 with the advent of the Anti-Christian Movement, but many in spite of their anti-imperialist and even pro-Communist orientation found, for instance, in the biblical stories or poetry, objects of their admiration and accommodated them for their creative purposes.

If we compare Ma Jia's book with that of L. S. Robinson, we may observe that it is very much indebted to the work of the American pioneer, but follows it only partly. Not Yu Dafu (1896-1945) and Guo Moruo (1892-1978) are the first to whom Ma Jia devotes his attention like Robinson, but Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren. To put Lu Xun on the first place was obligatory in that time, although probably not anymore now. Zhou Zuoren, in my opinion, did much more for the promotion of the biblical cause than his older and venerated brother. Ma Jia's book was a model for nearly all who followed him in writing books on the *Bible* and modern Chinese literature. After these two great personalities follow Xu Dishan (1893-1941), his pupil and colleague Bing Xin (1900-1999), Mao Dun

(1896-1981), Ba Jin (1904-2005), Yu Dafu, Lu Qiao (*1919), Guo Moruo, Shen Congwen (1902-1988), Lao She (1899-1966), Xiao Qian, Zhang Ziping (1893-1953), Su Xuelin (1899-1999), Lin Yutang (1895-1976), and some others (Cf. Xu Zhenglin 2003, 6-7).

Three years later in 1998 Yang Jianlong (* 1952) published *Kuangye de husheng. Zhongguo xiandai zuojia yu jidujiao wenhua* (*Crying in the Wilderness. Contemporary Chinese Writers and Christian Culture*). When looking at the two titles, one can observe that the slightly hesitant and shillyshally attitude of the first is put aside in the second book, although the “crying in the wilderness” is metaphorical and may mean the original Isaiah’s (late 8th cent. B. C.) challenge: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (*Isaiah, 40, 3*), or the words of St. John the Baptist, preparing the way for the Gospel of Jesus Christ: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand... Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (*St. Matthew, 3, 2-3*). It may also present, according to one of Yang Jianlong’s friends, Professor Chen Sihe, under the Chinese circumstances in the 1920s and 1930s, and even now, an epitheton leading to the enlightenment for the Chinese intellectuals, whose voices often were and still are at least to some extent similar to the Hebrew prophets. Their words could be characterized like “*vox clamantis in deserto*”. Christianity is a new positive element in Chinese culture enriching its old traditional values. This part of the foreign but living legacy was not and is not studied enough, and Chen Sihe encourages him, and doing this, he also exhorts others to do the same (Chen Sihe).

It was probably not necessary to do this since even before Yang Jianlong’s book, already in spring of 1996, Wang Xuefu’s book *Miwu*

shensuo de luzhou (*Enchanting and Hidden Oasis*), was ready for print. It appeared in Da jianzi Publishing House, without indicating the place (probably in Singapore or Malaysia) and the time of publication. Wang Lieyao's book *Jidujiao yu Zhongguo xiandai wenxue* (*Christianity and Modern Chinese Literature*) was published two months before Yang Jianlong's book in October 1998. Liu Yong's (* 1958) *Zhongguo xiandai zuojia de zongjiao wenhua qingjie* (*The Religious and Cultural Conditions in China and Modern Writers*) appeared in Peking in July 1998. At least three books in one year on the same quite new subject is a pleasant surprise for the indigenous, and even more for the foreign researchers.

The best Chinese book on the *Bible* and Christianity up to the end of the twentieth century was Wang Benchao's *20 shiji Zhongguo wenxue yu jidujiao wenhua* (*Twentieth Century Chinese Literature and Christian Culture*), which appeared in the last month of 2000 and was reprinted four months later in April 2001. Wang Benchao had the possibility to consult at least the earlier publications by Ma Jia, Yang Jianlong and Liu Yong and his work presents the apogee of the research into the *Bible* and Christianity from the literary point of view.

Apart from these books, probably a short version of the PhD. thesis by Xu Zhenglin entitled *Zhongguo xiandai zuojia he jidujiao* (*Modern Chinese Writers and Christianity*) appeared in the first month of 2001 in Liang Gong (ed.): *Jidujiao wenxue* (*Christian Literature*). In February 2003 the whole version was published under the title: *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yu jidujiao* (*Modern Chinese Literature and Christianity*). One book, published in March 2000, *Jidu jingshen yu Cao Yu xiju* (*Christian Spirit and Cao Yu's Dramas*), by Song Jianhua remained inaccessible to me at the time of writing this paper.

When writing on the *Bible* and literature in the PRC of the 1980s and 1990s, Karl Marx seemed to be a leading authority. Some probably regarded him as such, some have quoted him since it was a sheer necessity in order to see their essays or books published. According to one Chinese critic, Marx and Fr. Engels possessed not only “deep and original knowledge” of the *Bible* and Christianity, but were also able to give “shocking and creative instructions” (Zhu Yunbing, 108). Ma Jia used Marx’s characteristics of Christianity as *huanxiang de taiyang* (the imaginary Sun), although I doubt whether he agreed with this idea (Ma Jia, 2, Marx, 402). Both he and Yang Jianlong mentioned the works of Marx, Engels (and Yang even Lenin and Stalin) on the religion in the works cited, but it was more a lip service to the prescribed authorities than real following the instructions of the Marxist-Leninist “classics”. For Yang Jianlong the most important thing in Christianity and in the *Bible*, was its “human content”, and Engels was highlighting this aspect of religion (Yang Jianlong, 3), and many Chinese writers were stressing the same, whether they read Engels’ works or not. Wang Benchao does not mention Marx and Engels in his book at all.

This “human content” was stressed by Lu Xun, who stands in the foreground in the works of all three most important authors under analysis – Ma Jia, Yang Jianlong and Wang Benchao – although he did not fully deserve it (Ma Jia, 1-14, Yang Jianlong, 20-34, Wang Benchao, 59-75). For Lu Xun Jesus was a “Son of Man” only and not a “Son of God”. For Ma Jia Jesus and Lu Xun were the great poets. Together with Dante they form a trinity, the first of them was a a genius and creator of the era of

Christianity, the second was the predecessor of the Renaissance in Europe, and Lu Xun was instrumental for moulding the intellectual physiognomy of twentieth century China (Ma Jia, 1-14).

I would put Zhou Zuoren in Lu Xun's place. Even if Lu Xun's was older and his works where God and Satan in Miltonian and Byronian comprehension, or the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* are mentioned (Lu Xun, vol. 1, 205-211, 234), preceded by more than a decade Zhou Zuoren's seminal essay entitled *Shengshu yu Zhongguo wenxue (The Bible and Chinese Literature)*. The year of its publication - 1921 - become a *terminus post quem* for the appearance of literary works completely new in the history of Chinese literature. Being no Christian Zhou Zuoren propagated the beauty and grandeur of the biblical books. For him, as the first in China, biblical literature together with the classical Greek literature, was the greatest in the ancient world and presented models for creative emulation. Zhou Zuoren was a specimen of religious tolerance. In this respect he was different from his more famous brother, in whose heart "little love and much hate" was present (Ma Jia, 26).

Zhou Zuoren found his best successor in Zhu Weizhi (1905-1999). From his student years Zhu was enthralled by the *Old and New Testaments* and he devoted all the years of his long and productive life to extolling the literary beauty of these works, with the exception of the time he was not allowed to do so. He found a historian of his contributions in his pupil Liang Gong, but even Liang was not able to consult some of his difficult to find books such as, *Wenyi zongjiao lunji (Studies in Literature and Religion)*, or his biography *Wuchanzhe Yesu zhuan (Jesus the Proletarian)*. From the first his essays on the *Psalms, Song of Songs* and *Jiu ge (Nine Songs)* from *Chuci (Chu Elegies)*, were mentioned (Liang Gong 1999,

2000), and probably five studies concerned with Chinese Nestorianism (*jingjiao*) and *Jesus the Proletarian*, were never concretely analysed, and the last one, maybe, not even seen by any of Chinese critics (cf. Malek, Vol. 3b, 1335–1351).

The most peculiar among the Chinese writers of the previous century interested in the *Bible* was the Protestant preacher Xu Dishan, Christian theologian and good expert in Chinese Daoism and Buddhism. Like Lu Xun he extolled the human qualities of Jesus and probably did not believe in his resurrection. It was Jesus' "exalted disposition and God-spirit as expressed through the power of His all-embracing morality which causes to arise in one unlimited admiration, respect, reverence, trust and conversion" (Zhang Zhuling, 14).

Jesus Christ became the most popular biblical personality in China of the last century. He was also most appreciated, loved, although occasionally criticized and treated with irony, even with sarcasm (Malek, Vol. 3a and b). From Wang Guowei to Wang Meng (*1934) many writers, and even politicians, the followers of different politico-religious denominations, including Nationalists, Communists, and even the members of the Central Committees of the parties ruling in Nationalist and Communist China, expressed their *hommage* to Jesus' human or divine genius (Chiang Kaishek, Chen Duxiu Wang Meng) (cf. Malek, vol. 3a and b).

Bing Xin, the foremost Chinese woman poet of the first half of the twentieth century, was a Protestant Christian like her teacher and colleague Xu Dishan, but *hen suibian*, very liberal, and not very pious, as she said about herself (Zi Gang, 102). The impact of the *Bible* has been connected in her work in the interplay with the Buddhist and Hindu ideas (Gálik 1993).

Su Xuelin who “wandered under the cross” for some years, but later opted for Roman Catholicism, studied the *Bible* as a source for her mythological studies connected with the world as well as Chinese mythology. The Chinese scholars interested in the *Bible*, as far as I know, were interested more for her novel *Cixin (Pierced Heart)*, which either alludes to the heart of her mother, or to the poem entitled *Kai feng (Gentle Wind)* from *Shijing (The Book of Songs)*:

When a gentle wind from the south
Blows to the heart of those thorn-bushes
The heart of those thorn-bushes is freshened;
But our mother had only grief and care (Waley, 73)

The novel delineates the early part of Su Xuelin’s autobiography, her path to Christianity. Her more concrete works concerned with the *Bible*, for instance, the booklet *Zhongguo chuantong wenhua yu tianzhu gujiao (Traditional Chinese Culture and Old Biblical Teaching)* from the year 1950, remained unnoticed by Chinese scholars. It is true that many of Professor Su’s assertions are not trustworthy, since she never studied, or at least did not respect the peculiarities of the interliterary or intercultural process, but some of them are interesting. Such is her short notice about typological similarities between King David (r. ca. 1010–970 B. C.) and Duke Wen of Jin (Jin Wen gong) (r. 636–628 B. C.), alias Chong Er [56], one the greatest among the Hebrew rulers and the other very probably greatest among the Chinese rulers of the Chunqiu Spring and Autumn Period (771–482 B. C.) (Su Xuelin, 38–39).

The best among the Chinese writers influenced by the *Bible*, but himself not Christian, was Shen Congwen. His most important, although

not exclusive, source was the *Song of Songs*, one of the most beautiful works of love poetry in world literature. For many years it was his steady companion and we find its traces in his numerous stories, poems and literary sketches. His quotations from this work unjustly attributed to King Solomon are many and it is very probable that without reading and intimately knowing this jewel of old Hebrew poetry, Shen Congwen would not be able to write some of his most attractive stories about Miao girls and boys (Wang Xuefu, 144-158, Wang Benchao, 151-164). Another great poet Ai Qing (1910-1986) respected the humbleness and love for humankind of Jesus Christ, and he followed the *Song of Songs*, its Shulamite and unnamed Shepherd in his songs about revolution and love (Zhang Lingjie, 37 and 42).

Nearly all the Chinese writers of the twentieth century who used the biblical literary materials had a positive attitude to the *Bible*. With the exception of Zhu Zhixin (1885-1920), and he was not a writer but a political thinker, hardly any eminent Chinese writer had a negative attitude to this most influential collection of books in world literature (Malek, Vol. 3a, 1197-1207). Some writers, like Zhang Ziping, Lao She, or Xiao Qian were very critical of foreign Christian clergy, and even of the domestic “rice Christians”, but never of the biblical, that is Christian teachings (Ma Jia, 152-153, 174-185, 197-224, Yang Jianlong, 115-132, 146-161, 162-171, Wang Benchao, 178-210)

It is interesting that a very important source of the biblical information especially in the 1920s and 1930s was not the Book of Books itself, but Oscar Wilde and his one-act-play *Salome*.

Willy-nilly Oscar Wilde became in China the modern Apostle of the *Bible* in China of the 1920s and 1930s. After its first Chinese rendition by Tian Han (1898–1968) in 1920, *Salome* became a textbook for the Chinese playwrights. The impact of *Salome* as the most popular piece of decadent drama in world literature, is quite obvious in Guo Moruo's *Wang Zhaojun* and Zhuo Wenjun, Ouyang Yuqian's (1889–1962) *Pan Jinlian*.

At this place two Chinese literary historians had done an excellent job: Xie Zhixi and Wang Lieyao. Xie Zhixi in 1999 and 2000 published his seminal article (which was certainly written earlier) entitled: “‘Qingchun, mei, emo, yishu...’—weimei tuifeizhuyi yingxiang xiade Zhongguo xiandai xiju” “‘Youth, Beauty, Satan, Art...’—Modern Chinese Drama Under the Impact of Aesthetic Decadence”. Even before Wang Lieyao published the work mentioned above in 1998, and very probably before the end of 2000 he wrote a part of another book *Jidujiao wenhua yu Zhongguo xiandai xiju de beiju yishi* (*Christian Culture and the Tragic Consciousness in Modern Chinese Drama*), which appeared in June 2002.

Xie Zhixi's article analyses the works by Guo Moruo and Ouyang Yuqian, but also the plays by Wang Duqing (1898–1948) *Yang Guifei zhi si* (*Yang Guifei's Death*), Bai Wei's (1894–1986) *Fang Wen* (*Visiting Qingwen*), Xiang Peiliang's (1901–1965) *Annen* (*Amnon*), Xu Baoyan's (dates unknown) *Da Ji* and Su Xuelin's *Jiunluo de yanjing* (*Kunala's Eyes*). With the exception of *Visiting Qingwen*, which according to me had its model in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *La citta morta* (*The Dead City*), and not in *Salome*, I agree with the opinion of Professor Xie Zhixi. All other dramas just mentioned would be hardly possible without *Salome's* impact.

Wang Lieyao's framework is broader than that of Xie Zhixi and in his book lyric poems and works of fiction also undergo analysis. As to the impact of Wilde's *Salome*, his treatment is, according to my opinion, quite objective, with the exception of Xiang Peiliang's elaboration of the biblical theme of the deviant love of Amnon and Tamar, son and daughter of King David, from the book *II Samuel, 13*, 1-18. Xiang Peiliang as a playwright, theoretician of theatre and Director, was (and maybe even now still is) *persona non grata* for the literary historians in the PRC. *Kunāla's Eyes*, one of the best, but also nearly completely neglected works among the modern Chinese dramas, recreating the incestuous love of Tisyarakṣita, the youngest and most beautiful among the wives of King (or Emperor) Aśoka (r. ca. 272-232 B. C.), of the Mauryan dynasty in India, and her stepson Kunāla, was not analysed in Wang Lieyao's books.

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Apart from two books by Zhu Weizhi mentioned above, modern Chinese literature of the PRC became a real "wilderness", and even the "crying" of a single "prophet" was not allowed there. Zhu Weizhi shifted to translation of the famous works of English literature, like John Milton's (1608-1674) epics *Paradise Regained*, retelling the story of Christ's temptation, which was published in 1957. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* in his rendition appeared in 1981 and *Paradise Lost* in 1984, in the time of the "thaw" soon after the horrible Cultural Revolution.

The knowledge of the *Bible* (and of Christianity), was "smuggled" into the Mainland China through the great works of world literature, including

Dante's (1265-1321) *Divina commedia*, William Shakespeare's (1564-1616) *Hamlet*, John Bunyan's (1628-1688) *Pilgrim's Progress from this World to that Which Is to Come*, Johann Wolfgang Goethe's (1749-1832) *Faust*, Charlotte Brontë's (1816-1855) *Jane Eyre*, Thomas Hardy's (1840-1928) *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henryk Sienkiewicz's (1846-1916) *Quo vadis*, Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) *Resurrection*, were published and usually also republished between the founding of the PRC and the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Some dozens, if not more books with a close relation to the *Bible* appeared and reappeared there before 1963 and after 1978. A bibliographical list would be quite long (Cf. *Waiguo wenxue zhuzuo mulu he tiyao*).

Biblical renewal in the literary realm started in the post-Mao China in the year 1981 (Wang Benchao, 49-50). The Chinese literary critics devoted to this new phenomenon only very slight interest. Yang Jianlong analysed in his book the first works by Bei Cun and Wang Benchao wrote chapters on Bei Cun and Haizi (1964-1989). Otherwise only a few words were written about Wang Meng (Wang Benchao, 50), Shi Tiesheng (ibid., 54-55), Zhang Xionghui (ibid., 50-51), and some others. Here much more needs to be said in near future.

The situation in Taiwan after 1949 has been partly elucidated by L. S. Robinson, but he is not a Chinese critic. As far as I know, there is nobody who would be interested in this problem in the R. O. C., and the Mainlanders devoted their attention only to Zhang Xiaofeng (* 1941) (Yang Jianlong, 241-251, Wang Benchao, 231-244). Maybe she was the only one who supplied them with the materials. What has been done in this field in Hong Kong, Singapore and in the other parts of the Chinese world, remained behind the scope of my research.

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In twentieth century China, more than seventeen centuries after the classical works of foreign Buddhist literature, the *Bible* became the object of the study, critical evaluation and even of creative endeavours. The twentieth century was the first in Chinese history when the *Bible* ceased to be an object of religious propaganda of Christianity and became for many a treasury of literary stories, lyric poetry and dramatic plots that enriched modern Chinese literature. Communism and its atheist objectives broke up the threads of the interest for the *Bible* and Christianity among the Chinese intellectual strata for three decades between 1949 and 1979. Therefore we observe the ebb of this tide among the contemporary writers to these days.

Nevertheless, the impact of the *Bible* on modern Chinese literature, or at least the interest in it among the modern Chinese writers seems to be greater than for the Buddhist writings, or for *Koran*. We may see it also in the quantity (and maybe also the quality) of the critical or historical works. According to my knowledge two books were devoted to the impact of Buddhist writings (Tan Guilin and Ha Yingfei) and only one of the Islamic culture on modern Chinese literature of the twentieth century (Ma Lirong).

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