

THE REWRITING OF JESUS CHRIST:
FROM THE SAVIOUR TO THE PROLETARIAN
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ZHU WEIZHI'S
JESUS CHRIST AND *JESUS THE PROLETARIAN*¹

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Zhu Weizhi, a Chinese Christian scholar, published his book *Christianity and Literature* in 1940, one of the first in China to study the relationship between Christianity and literature. However, it is not so well known that he also published two biographies of Jesus Christ: *Jesus Christ* in 1948 and *Jesus the Proletarian* in 1950. In these two biographies, Zhu had very different opinions about Jesus who was changed from the Son of God or the Saviour to a son of the working class. Jesus is here described as a proletarian or a revolutionary after the founding of New China in 1949. By doing so Zhu tried to make his faith appropriate to Marxism and the socialist ideology of the day. This paper will attempt to explore the apparent 'need' for a rewriting of the Jesus narrative by Christian intellectuals around this period of Chinese history in order to discover whether this rewriting was prompted by old traditional Chinese cultural mores which arguably could be described as being non-Christian and non-Western in their spiritual and political outlooks? Or indeed was it due to widespread anxiety about the fate of the Chinese nation whose postcolonial visions of a new Utopian society compelled 'Chinese Christianity' to make adaptive changes more suitable to the 'New China'. These and other relevant questions will be explored in this article.

Key words: Jesus Christ, the Saviour, proletarian, postcolonial resistance, indigenous theology

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In 1940 Zhu Weizhi 朱维之 (1905 – 1999) published his famous monograph *Christianity and Literature* 基督教与文学 (*Jidujiao yu wenxue*), the first book in China to study the relationship between Christianity and literature. However, seldom known are his other two biographies of Jesus Christ: *Jesus Christ* 耶稣基督 (*Yesu Jidu*) published by Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局 in 1948 and *Jesus the Proletarian* 无产者耶稣传 (*Wuchanzhe Yesu zhuan*) published by the Christian Literature Society of China 广学会 (Guangxuehui) in 1950.² In the latter, the image of Jesus' was changed from that of being the Son of God, Messiah (the Saviour) and the founder of Christianity to the son of the working class, a proletarian, revolutionary and liberator who struggled against the Roman rule in his quest for a heaven on earth. Within less than three years, Zhu created two biographies of Jesus having two polarly opposite standpoints. This turn of event leads us to study how Jesus' images changed in the writings of Chinese Christian scholars from around 1949 onwards. As Chloë F. Starr points out, "The experience of the Peoples' Republican-era thinkers and their reading of both the Bible and Western theology is of great relevance for contemporary Chinese Christian studies and its relationship with world scholarship...how central the fate of the nation and the relation of culture to state was to contemporary thinkers."³ Zhu attempted to justify the legitimacy of Jesus the proletarian in the New China with Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' dialectical materialism. From his efforts we can see how a Chinese Christian scholar, in exploring indigenous Chinese theology, developed a compromising profile appropriate with the new socialist utopian ideal. This paper will argue that it was traditional Chinese culture, combined with the anti-Christian ethos of the Republican era (1911 – 1949), which combined with other factors (such as post-

² In the recent document "Zhu Weizhi xiansheng zhuzuo mulu ji gaishu" 朱维之先生著作目录及概述 [Catalogue and Summaries of Zhu Weizhi's Works], *Yesu Jidu* 耶稣基督 [Jesus Christ] not present and *Jesus the Proletarian* was mostly lost and unknown in China after the Cultural Revolution. Cf. LU, Longguang. 卢龙光. & WANG, Lixin. 王立新. (eds.), *Shengjing wenxue yu wenhua——Jinian Zhu Weizhi jiaoshou bainian danchen lunji* 圣经文学与文化——纪念朱维之教授百年诞辰论集 [*Biblical Literature and Culture: Essays in Memory of the Centenary of Professor Zhu Weizhi's Birthday*], pp. 24–26. I was told by Professor Gálik that he had been assuming *Jesus the Proletarian* as a fictional novel till he founded it in Robert P. Kramers' collection of books because it was classified into the category of novel in *Zhongguo wenxuejia zidian: Xiandai* 中国文学家字典·现代 [*The Dictionary of Chinese Literary: Modern*]. Professor Liang Gong 梁工 did not mention these two books in his introduction of Zhu Weizhi's writings of biblical materials.

³ STARR, Chloë F. 解读中国对西方的解读：民国时期神学对今天的意义。"Reading China Reading the West: The Relevance of Republican-Era Theology Today" In 汉学与当今中国 [Sinology and the World Today], which presents the abstracts of World Conference on Sinology 2012, p. 129.

colonial resistance to what were seen as ‘Western’ Christian doctrines, the fate and future of the Chinese nation, the new image of China after 1949) that constituted the significant context in which Zhu adapted the images of Jesus under a new ideology and historical background.

I. The reason of creating *Jesus Christ* and *Jesus the Proletarian*

Writing biographies of Jesus was always of importance in the ecclesiastical and literary history of Christianity. The Four Gospels of the New Testament record succinctly the life of Jesus from different perspectives, each paying specific attention to particular aspects of his character. Later writers in trying for ‘new’ images of Jesus became more and more complex in their approaches. For instance, E. Renan described Jesus as a quasi-feminine “genius poet”; G. Papini viewed him within Nietzsche’s philosophy of the superman; in the works of such left-wing writers as Upton Sinclair and Henri Barbusse, he morphed into a “revolutionary worker” and “labourer” with ambition and power; in Sarah Cleghorn, he was labelled as a “revolutionary socialist” and “comrade Jesus”. “These images reflect Jesus’ colourful characters. Sometimes, he is a majestic king; sometimes a handsome prince; sometimes a muscular worker; sometimes an amiable shepherd; sometimes a robust child; sometimes a naive baby; sometimes a tender woman; sometimes a brilliant angel.”⁴ Due to differences in historical background, faith and thought, writers usually presented a ‘Jesus’ stamped with his or her own individual experience, religious belief, cultural tradition and intellectual style. In this sense the biographies of Jesus by Chinese writers could be seen as characteristic of Chinese cultural demands.

The 1920s to the 1940s could be arguably seen as the culmination in a localising process of Christianisation in China. During the Republican era, many religious specialists and Christian scholars composed or translated a large quantity of books about Christianity into plain Chinese language. In *The Catalogue of Books during the Republican Era: Religion Volume (1911 – 1949)* 民国时期总书目：宗教 (*Minguo shiqi zongshumu: Zongjiao 1911 – 1949*), there were 104 items related to Jesus.⁵ These monographs or translations were concerned with Jesus’ divinity or humanity, the relationship between Jesusism 耶稣主义 and Chinese cultural traditions. It should be noted that Chinese Christian scholars writing biographies of Jesus reflected how Christianity in

⁴ ZHU, Weizhi. *Christianity and the Literature*, p. 34.

⁵ Cf. Beijing Library ed., *Minguo shiqi zongshumu: Zongjiao (1911 – 1949)* 民国时期总书目：宗教(1911 – 1949) [The Catalogue of Books during the Republican Era: Religion Volume (1911 – 1949)], Beijing: Shumu wenxian Press, 1995, p. 273.

China was becoming localised.⁶ The Chinese Christian Zhao Zichen 赵紫宸 who wrote biographies of Jesus life, portrayed him as a “moderate gentleman” 稳健的高士 whose ancient-styled diction he described as having ‘a kind of classic beauty’.⁷ Zhang Shizhang 张仕章, a proponent of the new ‘Jesusism’, in his book *A Revolutionary Carpenter* 革命的木匠 (*Geming de mujiang*), turned Jesus into a leader of workers and revolutionaries. Nevertheless, Zhu Weizhi wrote two biographies of Jesus which were quite different from each other in both theme and style. This arguably is an extremely rare case in Chinese academic circles, and on this basis it is intended here to use it as a study of the intellectual challenges (compromise and confrontation, obedience and struggle, acceptance and adjustment) of a Chinese Christian scholar around 1949 as well as the development of the concept of ‘Christian socialism’ in China.

In February 1948 *Jesus Christ*, co-authored by Wang Zhixin 王治心 and Zhu Weizhi, was published by Zhonghua shuju as the first volume of *Chinese Treasury* 中华文库 (*Zhonghua wenku*). In the preface to *Jesus the Proletarian* written at the University of Shanghai 沪江大学 on May 1st 1950, Zhu recalled this experience:

This is my second biography of Jesus. The first one was The True Stories of Jesus 耶稣正传 (Yesu zhengzhuan) written by Professor Wang Zhixin and me in the winter of 1947. He was responsible for the ‘introduction’ while I took responsibility for the rest. Actually, that book collected just the stories of Jesus as a religionist. Despite some revolutionary awareness, generally speaking, it tended towards idealism. Having read F. Engels ‘On the History of Early Christianity’ and K. Kautsky’s ‘Foundation of Christianity’ along with other social histories since 1948, I gradually understood the correct standpoints from which to develop my view of Jesus. The current situation has changed things completely. Two months ago, Mr. Yu Muren 余牧人 invited me to write this

⁶ The following books, for instance, depicted Jesus’ life, morality and ideal personality: Zhao, Zichen. 赵紫宸. *Yesu zhuan* 耶稣传 [The Biography of Jesus], Shanghai: Qingnian xiehui shuju 1935); Xie Fuya. 谢扶雅. *Beiyapozhe de fuyin* 被压迫者的福音 [The Gospel of the Oppressed], Qingnian xiehui shuju 1938); Zhang Shizhang. 张仕章. *Gemingde mujiang* 革命的木匠 [A Revolutionary Carpenter], Shanghai: Zhenli yu shengmingshe 1939); Wu Leichuan. *Modi yu Yesu* 墨翟与耶稣 [Mo Di and Jesus], Shanghai: Qingnian xiehui shuju 1940). Some essays stressed Jesus’ particularity, such as “Yesu Jidu de youyuedian” 耶稣基督的优越点 [Jesus Christ’s Advantages] by XU Baoqian 徐宝谦 and “Wo suo renshi de Yesu” 我所认识的耶稣 [Jesus Whom I Knew] by WU Yaozong 吴耀宗. More about Sinified Jesus and Chinese Jesusism during the Republican era, see GÁLIK, Marián, “Jesus the Proletarian. A Biography by Zhu Weizhi (1905 – 1999)”. In MALEK, Roman, *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*. Vol. 3b., 1999, op. cit. pp. 1339–1343.

⁷ ZHU, Weizhi. *Christianity and the Literature*, p. 32.

*pamphlet which would be published by the Christian Literature Society for China. I believe it was a good opportunity to announce my investigations of the last three years and have them discussed with the new generation of young men. A valuable task it seemed to be, so I said YES to his invitation.*⁸

Here Zhu Weizhi adapted Jesus; founder of Christianity and Son of God, to Jesus the proletarian and revolutionary. He arguably did this for the following reasons. Firstly, his view of the world had changed irrevocably. Reading Engels' and Kautsky's works and other related books converted Zhu from idealism to materialism. Secondly, the *context* in which he was writing had been transformed completely due to the new political situation in China. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, it was necessary to create an image of Jesus that differed from any previous Western versions for consumption by the masses, especially a new generation of young men and women who wanted a fresh approach to the study of the life of Jesus. Thirdly, the Christian scholar Yu Muren's invitation provided a good opportunity to publish Zhu's book.

It is noteworthy that the first author of *Jesus Christ* was not Zhu Weizhi but his teacher and colleague Wang Zhixin who had actually made contributions to the introduction only. Apparently, this reflected their unusual relationship. Twenty-four years older than Zhu, Wang (1881 – 1968) was born in the city of Wuxing 吴兴 (today known as Huzhou 湖州), Zhejiang province and converted to Christianity about 1900; Zhu was born of a Christian family in Wenzhou 温州, Zhejiang province. In 1921, Wang became a professor of Chinese philosophy in Jinling Union Theological Seminary at Nanjing 金陵神学院 and his close relationship with Zhu was established when the latter studied there from 1924 to 1927. In 1928 Wang recruited Zhu as his assistant after being appointed as the dean of faculty of arts in Fukien Christian University 福建协和大学. "In 1929 at the age of twenty-four, Zhu Weizhi left Shanghai, a city of 'noisy people and Western buildings'. His destination was Fukien Christian University (now part of Fujian Normal University) where he, having been recommended by Wang Zhixin, the dean of faculty of arts, and approved by Ching Jun Lin 林景润 the president, would offer a course on new Chinese literature."⁹ In 1934 Wang took up the post of the dean of the Chinese Department in Shanghai University 沪江大学; before long Zhu followed his teacher and stayed there for sixteen years

⁸ ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus the Proletarian*, p. 3.

⁹ MENG, Zhaoyi. 孟昭毅. "Zongheng ziyou lingyun bi - Zhu Weizhi bijiao wenxue sixiang lunlüe" 纵横自有凌云笔——朱维之比较文学思想论略 ["On Zhu Weizhi's Comparative Literature Studies". In *Biblical Literature and Culture: Essays in Memory of the Centenary of Professor Zhu Weizhi's Birthday*], p. 9.

(1936 – 1952) as Wang’s successor within the period (1948 – 1952).¹⁰ When Zhu wrote *Christianity and Literature* 基督教与文学 (*Jidujiao yu wenxue*, 1940), *Jesus Christ* (1948), *Essays on Literature and Religion* 文学宗教论集 (*Wenxue zongjiao lunji*, 1951) and *Jesus the Proletarian* (1951), Wang was his superior, colleague and close friend. As a Christian nurtured by traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, Wang tried to found “Chinese Christianity” rather than “Christian China”. Some of his books like *Notions of God in Chinese History* 中国历史上的帝观 (*Zhongguo lishi shang de diguan*), *A Christian’s Research of Buddhism* 基督徒的佛学研究 (*Jidutu de Foxue yanjiu*), *A Short History of Chinese Religious Ideas* 中国宗教思想史大纲 (*Zhongguo zongjiao sixiang shi dagang*), *Sun Yat-senism and Jesusism* 孙文主义与耶稣主义 (*Sun Wenzhuyi yu Yesuzhuyi*), explored common and complementary features between traditional Chinese culture and Christianity, suggesting that the latter should be engrained in the former so that an indigenous Christianity would take shape with any previous Western characteristics removed. Zhu shared Wang’s attitude towards Christianity, which implied a blending of Eastern and Western cultures, a practical statecraft and a kind of nationalism.

Chinese scholars described Jesus from a perspective different from that of their Western peers. They often compared him with Eastern sages such as Sakyamuni, Laozi, Confucius, Mencius and Mo Di 墨翟 (fl. 479 – 438 B.C.), and presented a view consciously or unconsciously, of Christianity in the context of Chinese culture. Even Chinese priests inevitably interpreted Christian doctrines in this indigenous way. Chinese people came to regard Jesus as a sage or a great man like Confucius and Mo Di because of the image of perfection. He displayed and placed Jesus in the long history of traditional Chinese culture and specific historical contexts. When a national crisis broke out in the 1940s, Christianity needed to survive so in the new socialist China of the late of 1950s, Zhu Weizhi made an immediate ‘politically appropriate’ response to the earlier works of Wang Zhixin, Zhao Zichen, Wu Yaozong 吴耀宗 and other Christian scholars. It was in this complex situation that Zhu wrote *Jesus Christ* and *Jesus the Proletarian*, both of which provided a ‘new’ image of Jesus not just seen as a moral paragon but also as a proletarian revolutionary. Interestingly, Zhu did not place much emphasis on *Jesus the Proletarian* when mentioning it in his own autobiography.¹¹ According to the Taiwanese scholar Chin Ken Pa 曾庆豹, “this might be due to its strong political overtones. Indeed, such a book

¹⁰ Zhu became a member of the Chinese Department of Tianjin Nankai University after the reform of the high education system in 1952.

¹¹ Cf. WANG, Shoulan. (ed.). 当代文学翻译百家谈 [The Talking Collections of Hundreds Translators], pp. 188–192.

characteristic of liberation theology and Christian socialism did not seem such a close fit with the changed political reality in the years after 1949”.¹² This prompts the following series of questions. Why did Zhu want to write another biography of Jesus? In what kind of social context and cultural atmosphere did the change of Jesus’ images take place? What could we learn from Zhu’s ‘postcolonial resistance’ writings?

II. The Adaption of Jesus’ Images: From the Saviour to the Proletarian

Comparing *Jesus Christ* with *Jesus the Proletarian*, we find that they are different from each other not only in title, structure, narrative, perspective and style, but also in material selection, character description, image and diction.

First of all, the change of book title and the new portraits of Jesus on the fly page highlighted variation in descriptions of Jesus’ character and indicated a shift of writing emphasis. In the former, it is the divinity of Jesus as “Messiah” (the Saviour) that the author intended to emphasise, whereas in the latter the identity of proletarian Jesus, implied by emphasising the comparison of Jesus’ family background with the lower class of labourers at the bottom of society, deliberately avoided any reference to Jesus’ nobleness of birth, his being descended from the ancient Hebrew Royal houses of Abraham and David.

Returning to the portrait of Jesus on the fly leaf described above; with the origin not indicated, the figure in *Jesus Christ*, which has a solemn expression and a sceptre in his right hand, his left hand index finger pointed upward ‘Heavenly’ as if announcing the Good News of the Gospels. On the next page was cited an important sentence from John 13:34: “A new commandment I give unto you: that you love one another as I have loved you.” Here implies the mission of Jesus as Messiah and is arguably stating the very essence of Christianity that love is the core doctrine of Jesus, and that Christianity is a religion related to the love of one’s neighbour as oneself.

The portrait in *Jesus the Proletarian* was partly copied from the *Shadow of Death* by the British painter William Holman Hunt (1827 – 1910), a symbolic painting which fuses both Jesus the imagined carpenter’s workshop at Nazareth with the execution ground on Golgotha. Through depicting elaborately Jesus the carpenter, it illustrates his humble origins and emphasises his image as labourer. This accords with the historical background in which Zhu Weizhi wrote the preface for the book on Labour Day of 1950, a period during which working

¹² CHIN, Ken Pa. “Wuchanzhe shiren--Zhu Weizhi de Yesu zhuan” 无产者诗人——朱维之的《耶稣传》[“W. T. Chu’s *Jesus the Proletarian*”]. In 道风: 基督教文化评论 [Logos & PNEUMA: Chinese Journal of Theology], 2013, Vol. 39, pp. 158–159.

class identity and high morals were much to the forefront in the new socialist China. Secondly, changes of content and rewriting of some chapters show that the two books were written in different writings, thinking and reading contexts. The “introduction” of *Jesus Christ* written by Wang Zhixin consists of four parts: 1. Why we need to research Jesus; 2. How to research Jesus; 3. Why Jesus is called Christ; 4. Jesus’ background. The “main body” written by Zhu Weizhi comprises twenty-five chapters: 1. The Infancy; 2. The Childhood; 3. The Teenager; 4. The Debut; 5. First Attack on Jerusalem; 6. Passing through Samaria; 7. Start from Capernaum; 8. Struggle against the Pharisees; 9. The Work Begins in the Next Year; 10. New Struggle; 11. Leisure Time; 12. His Journeys throughout Ancient Israel; 13. The Death of John the Baptist; 14. Secluded Days; 15. Visits Abroad; 16. Return from South; 17. On the Way to the Jerusalem; 18. Three Days in the capital; 19. Retreat to the Country; 20. Last Visit to Jerusalem; 21. Final Entry into the City; 22. Conflict with the Jewish Authorities; 23. The Last Supper; 24. Jesus’ Imprisonment; 25. Jesus’ Crucifixion and Death on the Cross.

In *Jesus the Proletarian* both the preface and the main body were written by Zhu, in the following twenty-six chapters: 1. “Behold!”; 2. A History Recorded by the People; 3. Brutal and Fraudulent Exploitation; 4. Jewish Society under the Rule of Romans; 5. Maria as Revolutionary Working Woman; 6. Jesus’ Childhood; 7. The Teenage; 8. Great Awareness; 9. Outline of Liberation Movement; 10. Return from Wild; 11. First Attack to Jerusalem; 12. Arrest of John the Prophet; 13. Start from Capernaum; 14. Enjoy Free Atmosphere; 15. New Situation; 16. Training on Hill; 17. Leisure Time; 18. Expand Coverage and Death of John; 19. Visit Abroad; 20. Return to Capernaum; 21. March on Jerusalem; 22. Three Days in Capital; 23. Silence Before the Storm; 24. Tragic Entry into the City; 25. The Night of Betrayal; 26. The Crucifixion.¹³

¹³ Published by Qingnian xiehui shudian in 1935, Zhao Zichen’s *Yesu zhuan* 耶稣传 [Biography of Jesus] was the first biography of Jesus written by Chinese. It had eighteen chapters: 1. The Age of Jesus; 2. Infancy; 3. Great Awareness; 4. Jesus’ Challenge to Jerusalem’s Leaders; 5. The Beginning of Career; 6. Jesus Selecting His Disciples and Instructing Them; 7. Jesus’ Unusual Abilities; 8. Jesus’ Teaching; 9. Jesus Abiding by Doctrines; 10. Jesus’ Last Striving in Galilee; 11. The Turning Point of Jesus’ Career; 12. Jesus’ Last Visit to Jerusalem and His Instruction on the Way There; 13. Jesus’ Last Visit to Jerusalem and What Happened on the Way There; 14. Jesus’ Challenge to the Governor of Jerusalem; 15. Jesus’ Enemies Framed Him; 16. Jesus’ Farewell to His Disciples; 17. The Crucifixion; 18. Aftermath of the Crucifixion. Zhao cited a saying of sages, literati or religionists after each chapter title as a brief summary. These citations embody indigenous consciousness, strong religious sentiments and a Sino-Occidental comparative perspective while essentially according with Gospels and Christian doctrines.

Here the first five chapters in *Jesus the Proletarian* suggest that Zhu changed his historical view – according to him, human history was a series of records that the ruling class kept exploiting and oppressing the exploited classes which in turn struggled against oppression and tyranny. From a Marxist historical view of class struggle, Zhu pointed out that the Roman Empire in which Jesus lived (he stressed Jesus’ proletarian family background in particular) was a period during which the lower working classes were brutally oppressed by the ruling class and its puppet Jewish regime in Judea. Some military terms in the table of contents such as “first attack”, “liberation movement”, “struggle”, “new situation”, “training”, “march on” and “coverage” reflect not only a close relationship between the book and the War of Liberation in China which had just ended, but also the influence of the Chinese Marxist views of class struggle.

Zhu Weizhi shared Wang Zhixin’s views on the cause, social functions and values of religion. For Wang’s part, “Jesus was a religious leader, a famous historical personage throughout the world... Religion was seen by him as having a consoling and inspiring power; thus, it may be used to maintain morality and human relationship. This awareness held strongly to the view that belief in Jesus was the only true and righteous path leading both believers and society as a whole to their true destination.”¹⁴ Zhu started the preface of – to *Jesus the Proletarian* in a similar vein: “Religion is a product of society the same as other cultural fruits like philosophy, arts and science. It develops with the advance of society... To understand the essence of Christianity, we should know its founder Christ’s thought and practice by taking off all strange costumes which feudalism and capitalism put on him in the last two thousand years.”¹⁵ Actually, Chinese Christian scholars like Wang and Zhu often discussed the cause of religion in terms of utilitarianism and materialism rather than faith itself. Therefore, they preferred to treat Christianity in the same manner as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. That meant that Jesus was seen basically as no more than the founder of a religion like Sakyamuni, Laozi and Confucius, a person of foresight. Differing from Wang, Zhu employed Marxist theory of class struggle, regarding all religions (including Christianity) as historical products of class struggle, describing Jesus’ thought and practice from the proletarian perspective. He attempted to remove the costumes which feudalism and capitalism had put on Jesus, but unexpectedly dressed him again in proletarian clothes.

It is still not a rarity in both Chinese and overseas academic circles to have Jesus represented as a proletarian iconic figure, revolutionary and liberator and

¹⁴ WANG, Zhixin, ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus Christ*, p. 1.

¹⁵ ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus the Proletarian*, pp. 1–2.

not surprising at all in the Chinese context since most of the relevant ‘theoretical’ sources and historical materials that Chinese scholars used came from their overseas peers. Zhu Weizhi had read Buck White’s *The Call of the Carpenter*, F. H. Stead’s *The Proletarian Gospel of Galilee* and Yonezawa Shozo’s 米泽尚三 *The Proletarian Jesus*. Among books related to Jesus’ life, it was David Smith’s *The Days of His Flesh* that influenced him the most. At the same time, he was influenced by Engels’ *On the History of Early Christianity* and K. Kautsky’s *Foundation of Christianity*.

Thirdly, both of the biographies had a difference in narrative structure, narrative perspective, setting and style. Drastic representational adjustments had been made in *Jesus the Proletarian*. *Jesus Christ* relates the life of Jesus from a religious perspective in an emotional and touching way, focusing on his divinity, his identity as Messiah and the Gospel of love. Being mostly consistent with the Four Gospels, the whole story embraces passion and piety. *Jesus the Proletarian*, however, emphasises Jesus’ upbringing from a sociological and historical viewpoint on the basis of evolutionism and Marxist class struggle theory. It is a mix of historical facts about the Jewish nation borrowed from the Gospels, Josephus Flavius’ *Antiquities of the Jews* and Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Marxist terminology, personal comments and arbitrary explanations. The moralising narration reads tedious and perfunctory, even aggressive. Some conclusions and judgments tend to be ungrounded and go against the spirit of the New Testament as a religious text. For instance, while giving a detailed account of Jewish society under the colonial rule of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus, Zhu Weizhi divided it as the class theory indicates into aristocracy (Sadduces), bourgeoisie (Pharisees) and proletariat (Zealots and Essenes). The Essenes belonged to “a kind of communism”. After the fall of the Jewish nation, in Galilee emerged another party under the leadership of the proletarian Jesus, it naturally became a proletarian revolutionary religion. That Zhu put Christianity at the side of communism, on the one hand, highlights Jesus’ identity as the representative of the oppressed class; on the other hand, it fits into the context of socialist ideology, providing a proletarian saint and spiritual model thought by Zhu to be fulfilling the needs of the masses, especially younger readers.

In *Jesus Christ*, Jesus’ mother Mary was “born of a noble family, well-educated, beautiful and virtuous”. His father Joseph “was a carpenter, a descendant of the legendary Biblical King David. In spite of the outstanding family background, he lived poor but modest”. Mary became pregnant before her marriage. “Christians believe this was the incarnation of ‘Logos’; for our Chinese, however, this was no more than an ancient notion that emperors were

born after their maternal pregnancy caused by sensing the divine spirit.”¹⁶ In *Jesus the Proletarian*, Mary turned out to be a “revolutionary working woman”, belonging to neither aristocracy nor bourgeoisie. “Despite a lowly status, she had never stopped pursuing her lofty and revolutionary patriotic ideals”; “she was a brilliant woman with wisdom, ambition, patriotic ideals and class passion.”¹⁷ As to Joseph, Zhu did not mention his descent, but stressed that he “was honest and austere, always ready for service. Instead of talking much, he buried himself in labouring woodwork, feeling the vicissitudes of life”. Both Mary and Joseph were “proletarian workers, thus it was not necessary for them to follow seculars” to hold a lavish wedding ceremony.¹⁸ Moreover, through omitting the process of Mary’s pregnancy, Zhu completely removed the divinity of Jesus as “the Son of God”. The incredible moment of Jesus’ birth was described minutely and piously in *Jesus Christ* whereas in *Jesus the Proletarian* it was condensed into only a few words and nearly all references to miracles, religious speeches and supernatural phenomena were omitted or vaguely told.

Fourthly, there are huge differences even contradictions between the two books in their respective descriptions of Jesus’ personality, fate, mission and objective. *Jesus Christ*, in a view of comparative culture, concentrates on the teen years during which Jesus grew up via learning, working, meditating and his growing awareness, in particular his process of steeling himself for the vicissitudes of the future: “His greatest achievement was the nurturing of the habit of working and meditating. He kept working, kept learning, kept thinking. This is an ideal example of self-education... In China, great personages such as Jiang Ziya 姜太公 and Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 often underwent periods of meditative reflection before realising their aspirations.”¹⁹ This is typical Chinese understanding and is a good example of a comparative view of narrative emphasis in regard to Jesus’s life, namely emphasis on self-cultivation as per the old adage: “If poor, they attended to their own virtue in solitude; if advanced to dignity, they made the whole kingdom virtuous as well” 穷则独善其身，达则兼济天下 (*Mencius*, Book VII, part 1, chapter 6; trans. James Legge). Nevertheless, *Jesus the Proletarian* constantly reminds the reader of Jesus’ main objective in launching a liberation movement: “Not only was he going to liberate slaves and transform them, but also ameliorate their lives and that of humanity generally by his example. He strived for permanent democracy and freedom, for a new society with no class and no oppression at all.”²⁰

¹⁶ WANG, Zhixin, ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus Christ*, p. 17.

¹⁷ ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus the Proletarian*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

¹⁹ WANG, Zhixin, ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus Christ*, p. 29.

²⁰ ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus the Proletarian*, p. 31.

Conspicuous here is its Utopian significance whereas disappeared were so many descriptions about spiritual and supernatural phenomena with the 'new' proletarian Jesus becoming a hero and a model for workers and proletarians.

In order to persuade the reader that Jesus was a proletarian and revolutionary, which is not an easy task, Zhu Weizhi substituted "The Sermon on the Plain" (Luke 6:20-26) for "The Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5:3-12) used in *Jesus Christ* because the former referred to the need of the poor, love and tolerance.²¹ Meanwhile, he attempted to find common ground between Jesus' religious view and the Marxist world view: "Since ancient times the Hebrew have struggled for justice. Most revolutions in the world originated from this nation. Marxism and Leninism could be regarded as the modern development of Hebraism. In veins of Marx and Lenin, the great revolutionaries who liberated workers of all lands, ran the blood of this nation."²² The statement is true for Marx as he was a Jew, and also for Lenin who had 1/4 Jewish origin. Zhu Weizhi revealed a secret about the relationship between Marx-Lenin and Jewish which most of Chinese didn't know.

Many biographies of Jesus culminate with the final scenes of Jesus' crucifixion, death and Resurrection, the last being a great symbol of hope in the history of humanity. In *Jesus Christ*, it is narrated in a detailed and solemn way:²³

From noon to mid-afternoon, the sky was covered with dark clouds which left no crevice for a single ray of light. Jesus suffered so much from the wounds that he could not help cry out: 'My God, my God, why did you leave me?' Some of the onlookers assumed that he was calling the prophet Elijah to save him. How absurd they were!

Having lost a lot of blood, Jesus said 'I'm thirsty.' Then a man dipped a stick of sea weeds into vinegar and tied it on a reed to feed him. Finally, he shouted 'Enough!' before the death. This was a victory shout because he had succeeded in finishing his mission of sacrifice. Despite a failure in the masses' eyes, he established a victory basis for a surpassing and long-term project.

Shocked by how Jesus died, a centurion sighed, 'What a righteous man! He truly is the son of God!'

In his lifetime, Jesus had repeated the significance of sacrifice to the disciples whom he hoped to understand his determination to die.

He said, 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.'

Jesus has been resurrected. He lives in the heart of many Christians. Jesus has been resurrected, bringing forth more Jesuses as if a corn of wheat fell into the ground, died and brought forth much fruit.

²¹ Ibid., p. 78.

²² Ibid., p. 30.

²³ WANG, Zhixin, ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus Christ*, p. 98.

However, in *Jesus the Proletarian*, the scene was condensed into only three lines in Chinese:²⁴

Jesus breathed his last three or four hours after being nailed to the cross at noon. Having witnessed the tragedy, his birth mother, his favourite disciple John and female follower Mary Magdalene who had ever kissed his feet were all overcome with grief. Even a centurion could not help sighing with tears: 'What a righteous man!'

The first citation embodies the theological significance of Jesus' crucifixion, death and resurrection. In the second, however, relative expressions except a scenic description were removed alongside discourse about deity or God and all miracles in order to accord with socialist atheism.

All in all, Zhu Weizhi made adjustments to Jesus' image in four aspects: (1) changing Jesus' identity—from a religious leader to a proletarian as carpenter and revolutionary leader; (2) changing the style of description—less "divinity" (Jesus' awareness, his relationship with God, his mission, etc. are seldom read in *Jesus the Proletarian*), more "humanity" (such as nobleness, self-sacrifice, abhorrence of evil, consciousness of human rights and democracy); (3) exploring social elements in Jesus' thought—concern about the poor, striving for liberating the proletariat, sacredness of work, reforming an unequal society; (4) underlining that what Jesus did was a liberation movement which would transform this world into a 'heaven on earth' trying to prove a consistence between the ideals of Christianity and that of socialism, supposedly adding 'socialist' validity to Jesus' existence.

III. Context of Adaptation: Christian Indigenization and Its Difficulties

In *Jesus the Proletarian*, Zhu Weizhi tried to take off Jesus' mystique and re-label him as a Marxist or proletarian; the methodology and terminology he employed were also borrowed from dialectical materialism and Chinese-styled Marxism. He attempted to portray Jesus as a man of love, kindness, sympathy, justice and ideal personality, but at the same time, annihilated the transcendent divine dimension (miracles, Holy Spirit, God, Kingdom of Heaven, crucifixion and resurrection, Messiah, Saviour, etc.). As a result, his Jesus was a man no different than Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Mo Di and other moral teachers and saints. Christianity was inevitably reduced to a revolutionary religion with a reforming society as its main objective after Jesus the leader became a

²⁴ ZHU, Weizhi. *Jesus the Proletarian*, p. 106.

revolutionary rather than a founder of a religion. At that time there were no realistic problems as urgent as saving the country, loving the country, reforming society and reality. It was not necessary for the author to discuss spiritual Christian concepts (e.g. grace, tolerance, sin). Besides excessive historical facts and didacticism, the reader has to cope with baffling misinterpretation caused by occasional contradictions in narration. For instance, Jesus was regarded as a man full of revolutionary enthusiasm, struggling against colonisers, aristocracy and tyrants. His image contradicts the original one that advocated love, tolerance and repentance. Sometimes, however, Zhu's comments on Jesus' thought and practice go beyond contemporary ideology, bringing forth his morality and charisma as well as the spirit of sacrifice and single-minded pursuit of equality, fairness, justice, love, etc. From this aspect his Jesus could be valuable for establishing a socialist system, but not necessarily a religious one.

In looking for common ground between the Christian idea of Heaven and the ideal communist world, Zhu intended to prove the consanguinity of Marxism, Leninism and Judaism in order to indicate that the spreading of the Gospel instead of conflicting with socialism or Marxism, conformed to and could be applicable to its new social ideals. Unfortunately, it turns out that Marxists and proletarians disliked not only the Gospel of love which distinguished no classes and principles, but also the sacred role Jesus played as the saviour of humanity. In 1948, Zhu still took Christianity as his faith or spiritual sustenance. After 1949, however, he began to study Marxist and Leninist dialectical materialism and reform himself like other Chinese intellectual visions of a new World. On the basis of socialist ideology, he defended the legitimate existence of Christianity in New China through involving Jesus' "revolutionary aspect" (as a working man and proletarian) and neglecting his "godhood" (divinity), though he knew this seemed like an impossible task. In fact, for those scholars who had sympathy for, or supported Christianity in the socialist age, it was difficult, even dangerous to proclaim their concerns in a rational and prudent way. The publication of Zhu's works in the early years of New China were mainly achieved by his adjustment of modes of writing within the new political context he found himself in. Unfortunately, in spite of sincere efforts, Zhu still underwent an unexpected adversity.

Before the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, *Jesus the Proletarian* played an important role for Chinese in learning about Jesus and Christianity; it existed as a contradictory and bizarre biography which rewrote the pre-texts (the Four Gospels and *Jesus Christ*). During the special period from 1953 to 1979, all religions were as "opium" harmful to the masses and 'an excrescence of feudalism'. With the advent of the Great Leap Forward (1958 – 1960), the movement of "pulling out the white flag and inserting the red flag" and the

Cultural Revolution after 1966, Zhu Weizhi became one of its so-called ‘monsters and demons’ 牛鬼蛇神 (literally, “oxen ghosts and snake spirits”) in Nankai University (南开大学). Labelled as a “counter-revolutionary academic authority” 反动学术权威, “escaped rightist” 漏网右派, “Christian proponent” 基督教吹鼓手, “evil traitor” 大汉奸, “executioner of revolutionary students” 镇压革命学生的刽子手, etc, he was publicly denounced and humiliated together with other professors by the Red Guards who half shaved their heads, smeared their faces with black ink and hung placards around their necks. In the face of these unbearable political persecutions, some of them committed suicide whereas Zhu clung to his Christian spirituality for survival. Even in the darkest days, he still succeeded in translating Milton’s three epics—*Paradise Lost* (published by Shanghai Yiwen Chubanshe 上海译文出版社 in 1985 as the first Chinese version), *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. It was Jesus’ doctrines and Milton’s tough spirit that accompanied him in the vicissitudes of time and persecution.

Significantly, in contrast to his preference for Christian faith and culture, Zhu joined the Chinese Communist Party at the age of 78 as a consequence of the persecution he suffered during his life believing that the situation would improve after the Cultural Revolution and the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976. Before his joining the Communist Party in 1983 he was the first in mainland China to begin to write about the Bible in 1980 – 1982.²⁵ In Zhu’s intellectual exploration, Marxism and the City of God in Christianity, atheist communism and atheist Jesusism, did not go against each other in Chinese modern social system. For Zhu’s part, proletarian revolutions should not be equal to atheism; Christianity should not divorce from social revolutions; Christians and socialists could cooperate together against imperialist invasions and serve for the communist ideal. The contemporary Marxist Slavoj Žižek states that “against the old liberal slander which draws on the parallel between the Christian and Marxist ‘Messianic’ notion of history as the process of the final deliverance of the faithful”, therefore “instead of adopting such a defensive stance”, what we should do is “fully endorse what one is accused of: yes, there is a direct lineage from Christianity to Marxism”.²⁶ This is understandable in order to explain the coinciding of Zhu’s communist ideal with Christian “Messianic” notion of history.²⁷

²⁵ GÁLIK, Marián. “The Reception of the Bible in the People’s Republic of China (1980 – 1992). Observations of a Literary Comparatist”. In GALIK, Marián. *Influence, Translation and Parallels. Selected Studies on the Bible in China*, pp. 95–100.

²⁶ ŽIZEK, Slavoj. *The Fragile Absolute, or Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?*, p. 2.

²⁷ As Zhu Weizhi’s disciple, the scholar of Biblical Literature Liang Gong, pointed out

Zhu Weizhi's images of Jesus are in tone and respect quite different from Zhao Zichen's. It is worth exploring further the reasons why Zhu rewrote Jesus' image within a space of no more than three years. I would argue here that no judgement can be reached until we consider the fact that the Chinese Christian world view had to fit into the socialist system and ideology of the day. These were the very real challenges which Christianity was faced with in the PRC, and Zhu's shift of worldview to Marxism could be better understood in this context. Alternatively, Zhu was more influenced by "native Christians" like Wu Leichuan 吴雷川 (1870 – 1944) and Wang Zhixin who had never studied overseas unlike "returnee Christians" like Wu Yaozong, Zhao Zichen and Xie Fuya. (The former who was devoted to the linkages between traditional Chinese culture and Christian culture often "brought Confucianism or Modism into Christianity", employing Confucian "practical statecraft" or Mo Di's "universal love" to transform Chinese churches, emphasising Jesus' "humanhood" [humanity] rather than "godhood" [divinity]). Another possibly viewpoint would be that compared to his precedents, Zhu had a better opportunity to learn Marxist materialism, absorbing its views of religion and of art to bring forth a methodology which borrowed from Jesus "humanity", great personality and insistence on social reform instead of his "divinity" and theological impact. He could have possibly even attempted to open an indigenous (or localised) theological field with modern Chinese characteristics through mediating between Jesusism and socialism (communism).

British scholar Elleke Boehmer's central argument is that rather than simply being a reflection of social and political reality, literature is actively engaged in the processes of colonisation, decolonisation, and post-independence national identity formation, all, in many respects, "textual undertakings".²⁸ Therefore, localisation is no more a cultural but political problem. In the process of Christian localisation, the writer had to cater for national ideology and the contemporary requirements of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. In this sense, Zhu's *Jesus the Proletarian* could be regarded as a postcolonial text with liberation theological significance, a political text in which imperialist cultural and colonialism had been replaced under a socialist reformation of society.

in a letter (on 14th Dec. 2014) to me – the author that "in China whose history and reality were extremely complicated, a definitely possible choice rather than a merely unwilling 'brainwash' was that an intellectual accepted the ideology with heart and soul so as to actualize the value of life and serve his motherland. While studying in Nankai University, I often heard Mr. Zhu saying that 'religion will not die out even in the communist stage'. Obviously, his political view did not compromise with any popular doctrine."

²⁸ BOEHMER, Elleke. *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, p. 5.

Consequently, Jesus became a revolutionary and liberator fighting against imperialist tradition and oppression. As Chin Ken Pa points out: “biographies of Jesus written by Chinese authors paid much more attention to a concrete context (localisation). This is the reason why Jesus was presented as a liberator. It is so in Zhao Zichen’s with the term ‘liberator’ understood in the spiritual sense, namely what he called ‘save the country with his personality’ 人格救国论 whereas in Zhu’s as in Wu Leichuan’s, Jesus turned into ‘a social reformer’”.²⁹ The concerns with China’s national fate and future, with cultural identity and PRC urged Zhu to defend the legitimate existence of Christianity in socialist China. This embodies his Utopian desire for a new society and world, and reflects his sense of historical mission and responsibility to set a new moral code for a new generation in China. Moreover, it draws attention to how postcolonial resistance and recognition of national identity conflicted in a Chinese Christian scholar who had been trying to establish an indigenous theology in the meeting (or mutual rejection) of Eastern and Western cultures.

To sum up, when adapting the image of Jesus, Zhu Weizhi preferred a humanistic rather than theological perspective, treating Christianity as an ideal approach to social and political reform. Guided by a Chinese way of thinking (“domestication” 化外为内 or “Sinisation” 化西为中), his re-invention of the Jesus image was a response to the socialist transformation he was witnessing all around him. However, it was shown that replacing “divinity” with “humanity”, ‘advocacy of faith’ with “religiousness” eventually made Christianity lose its particularity as a universal religion, reducing it to a historical product initially analogous to other religions and doctrines. By juxtaposing *Jesus Christ* and *Jesus the Proletarian* in the historical context of 20th century China, we can deduce how Chinese Christian scholars in the China of the 1940s and 1950s responded and adjusted to the challenges presented by the meeting of East and West, theism and atheism, national consciousness and identity recognition, postcolonial resistance and Christian socialism.

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²⁹ CHIN, Ken Pa. “Wuchanzhe shiren--Zhu Weizhi de Yesu zhuan” 无产者诗人——朱维之的《耶稣传》[“W. T. Chu’s Jesus the Proletarian”]. In 道风: 基督教文化评论 [Logos & PNEUMA: Chinese Journal of Theology], 2013, Vol. 39, p. 180.

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