

# *The Influence of Christian Culture on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature—A Textual Analysis Based on Cao Yu's "Thunderstorm"*

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**Abstract:** With the introduction of Western learning to China, modern Chinese literature has undergone great transformation. The influence of Christian culture on contemporary Chinese writers has been increasing, and the spiritual essence of Christianity has profoundly shaped the value system in modern Chinese literature. Cao Yu, being one of the distinguished authors deeply impacted by Christianity, exhibits a strong religious inclination and a profound awareness of the God in his early ideological thoughts and playwriting. His renowned work, "Thunderstorm," presents several significant Christian themes, imbued with a rich tapestry of Christian implication, thus becoming a compelling testament to the influence of Christian culture on modern Chinese literature.

Christianity, as one of the world's three major religions, holds a significant position in the development and cultural exchange between the East and the West. In the short span of a century since its introduction to China, Christianity has become an influential religion, leaving a profound impact and playing a pivotal role in enlightening and propelling China's cultural endeavors. Contemporary Chinese literature broke through its rigid barriers and absorbed the nourishing essence of modernity, displaying unprecedented brilliance. Looking back at the century-long journey of contemporary Chinese literature and its study, numerous Chinese writers have been intricately connected to Christianity, including the likes of Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Ba Jin, Lao She, Cao Yu, Bing Xin, Xu Dishan, Feng Zikai, Guo Moruo, Yu Dafu, Mao Dun, Shen Congwen, Ai Qing, Xu Zhimo, Dai Wangshu, Lin Yutang, Fei Ming, Eileen Chang, and many others.<sup>[1]</sup> Their literary creations invariably bear the essence of Christian cultural spirit to varying degrees.

The "Bible," as the sacred scripture of Christianity, comprises the "Old Testament" and the "New Testament." The "Old Testament" mainly recounts the events before the birth of Jesus, while the "New Testament" records the deeds after Jesus' birth. Beyond presenting Christian doctrines, the "Bible" has profoundly influenced Western society's spiritual beliefs and values. With its mythical religious narratives, historical and ethical stories, and profound philosophical proverbs, the "Bible" has deeply captivated Chinese writers. Presented primarily in a narrative form, the "Bible" exhibits distinct literary characteristics in its genre innovation, character portrayal, narrative structure, and rhetorical techniques, manifesting a striking literary quality. As Flaubert stated if the "Bible" itself did not possess literary merit, no book could have such an impact on literature. The literary essence of the "Bible" has played a vital role in the development of subsequent literature.

In the mid to late 20th century, Chinese literature witnessed a profusion of literary works drawing inspiration from biblical allusions, depicting Christian doctrines, the lives of Christians, and the spirit of Christianity. Linguistically, their works often featured Christian terminology such as God, Jesus, Virgin Mary, Christ, heaven, Purgatory, Repentance, prayer, Angels, Satan, baptism, gospel, cross, Garden of Eden, sin, Jerusalem, earth, and scapegoat. Poets, in particular, exhibited a predilection for incorporating Christian vocabulary as recurrent imagery in their modern poetry and other literary compositions. Moreover, writers introduced a multitude of Christian themes into their works, shaping characters who either converted to Christianity or embodied the Christian spirit.

In this essay, the author shall commence with Cao Yu's renowned work, "Thunderstorm," and, in conjunction with the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, analyze the Christian undertones evident in Cao Yu's early dramatic creations. Through this examination, we endeavor to discover the profound influence of Christian cultural spirit on contemporary Chinese writers' thoughts and literary endeavors.

## **1. The Manifestation of Christian Spirit in Cao Yu's "Thunderstorm"**

### **1.1 Background of the creation of "Thunderstorm"**

Among modern Chinese writers, Cao Yu stands as one of those writers who developed a profound relationship with Christianity and was greatly influenced by it. This relationship and influence stem from two factors:

Firstly, following the May Fourth Movement that emerged in the early 20th century, Christianity established multifaceted connections with Chinese culture, exerting a profound impact on contemporary Chinese literature in terms of ideological thoughts, drama creation, novel writing, poetry composition, and the spirit of modern literature. While these works might not all be considered literary masterpieces of modern literature, they collectively form a unique literary realm infused with religious implication. Many Chinese modern poets and writers were, to varying degrees, affected by religious inspiration in their thoughts. Additionally, they borrowed biblical vocabulary and allusions, such as Eden, paradise, Forbidden Fruit, Satan, Cain, God, Virgin Mary, Angels, Grace, cross, baptism, Repentance, the Last Supper, prophets, gospel, Solomon, Adam, Eve, resurrection, and others. Notable authors like Guo Moruo, Bing Xin, Cao Yu, Xu Dishan, Ba Jin, Lao She, Mao Dun, and many more referenced, commented on, or introduced biblical literature in their works. For instance, in the prelude of "Sunrise," Cao Yu quoted several passages from various biblical books, including the first chapter of the "Book of Romans" from the New Testament, the fourth chapter of the "Book of Jeremiah" from the Old Testament, the third chapter of the "First Epistle to the Thessalonians" from the New Testament, the "First Epistle to the Corinthians" from the New Testament, the eighth and eleventh chapters of the "Gospel of John" from the New Testament, and the twenty-first chapter of the "Book of Revelation," all of which reveal the author's knowledge and comprehension of biblical literature.

Secondly, Cao Yu grew up in the city of Tianjin, which bore a strong Christian influence. Tianjin was once an active center of Christianity. For instance, the renowned British Baptist missionary Timothy Richard, who arrived in China in 1870, carried out missionary work in Tianjin and served as the chief editor of the Tianjin Times. Cao Yu attended Nankai Middle School from 1922 to 1928 before entering Nankai University. At that time, the president of Nankai University, Zhang Boling, was an American scholar and a baptized Christian. He advocated that "today's religion, the true essence of religion, is not limited to preaching gods and praying to God but rather, it should employ the power of religion to transform society, ensuring that our nation is not inferior to that of other countries."<sup>[2]</sup>

The activities of the Nankai Christian Youth Association and President Zhang's religious beliefs

provided enlightenment and a significant impact on Cao Yu's contemplation of the meaning of life and his ideals for society.

Furthermore, from an early age, Cao Yu experienced the loss of his mother and rarely experienced the warmth of familial love, which led him to prematurely encounter the loneliness of life and the indifference between individuals. Consequently, these experiences cast a shadow upon his soul, fueling his quest for the meaning of human destiny and a yearning for love. Moreover, Cao Yu attended church since childhood, and later, during his university years at Tsinghua University, he studied Western literature. After graduation, he even taught "Biblical Literature" at Hebei Women's Normal College. These latent influences and impacts guided Cao Yu to explore life through the lens of religion.

Apart from his literary exposure, Cao Yu had a profound affinity for music, particularly the classical works of Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach. The church music and bell tolls he heard during his childhood church visits left a lasting impression on him, especially Bach's compositions, such as the "St. Matthew Passion" and the "Mass in B Minor." The philosophical depth of Bach's works prompted Cao Yu to contemplate life more profoundly. Thus, when he was in the grand hall of Tsinghua University, it brought to his mind the French church in Tianjin, as if Bach's Mass was echoing in his ears. Not only did Cao Yu have a special fondness for classical music, but he also had an interest in Western music. Clearly, his profound impression of music directly manifested in his creation of his first work, "Thunderstorm." Hence, we can assert that Cao Yu's life background, literary exposure, and musical influences were immensely significant. He utilized his dramatic works to showcase this distinctive personal creative style. In his first work, "Thunderstorm," it is evident that he merged religious thinking, social phenomena, and a profound portrayal of human nature. This undoubtedly represented Cao Yu's venture into mature thoughts, and his philosophical views were masterfully expressed in "Thunderstorm."

In summary, "Thunderstorm" emerged as a masterpiece during the tumultuous era of the May Fourth Movement, influenced by Cao Yu's family and life background.

## 2. Christian Spirit in "Thunderstorm"

The theme of "sin and redemption" conveyed in "Thunderstorm" embodies the essence of Christian spirit. This underlying message unfolds from the prologue, and then evolves and unfolds through the first to fourth acts, narrating the process and intricacies of sin, leading up to the epilogue where the significance of Christian concepts of sin, repentance, redemption, and salvation is once again highlighted.

The backdrop of the prologue in "Thunderstorm" is set in a "hospital annexed to a church," with a "crucified Jesus" hanging on the "fireplace," and in the distance, the sound of bells emanates, the organ music from within the church, specifically Bach's "Mass in B Minor." Conversely, the "epilogue" concludes with the scene of an old grandmother reading the "Bible." It is evident that the presence of Christian elements is deeply embedded in the script of "Thunderstorm."

The essence of Christian faith lies in its doctrine, commonly believed to be derived from the "Bible." Though various denominations may have divergent interpretations, the fundamental teachings generally revolve around four aspects: creation, the original sin, salvation, and the heaven and hell. Additionally, Christian faith encompasses ideas of repentance, resurrection, and universal love.

Throughout Cao Yu's creation of "Thunderstorm," it is believed that the influence of Christian concepts of original sin, salvation, and repentance are most pronounced. The following analysis will be based on specific plot events and characters in the play.

## 2.1 Sin and Evil in "Thunderstorm"

In Christian culture, sin is specifically divided into original sin and actual sin. Original sin is the inherent sin that every individual is born with, while actual sin refers to the personal sins committed by individuals, which can be diverse and encompass a wide range of wrongdoings. These sins may be internal, stemming from aspects of one's inner life such as pride, envy, hatred, lust, and evil desires, or they may manifest as external actions, such as deceit, murder, adultery, and so forth. A close reading of the text reveals that both the awareness of original sin and actual sins exist in the plot of "Thunderstorm."

The sins portrayed in "Thunderstorm" emanate from humanity's pursuit of carnal desires, a kind of indulgence in physical passion. Examples of this include the passionate love and resentment between Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping, the incestuous relationship between Fanyi and Zhou Ping, and the blood-related affection between Zhou Ping and Sifeng. These carnal desires are both a common aspect of human nature and the root of sin. The irrational pursuit of carnal desires is, in fact, a force of destruction, an undeniable wildness, as Cao Yu puts it, a "legacy of primal savagery," and it is the very source that leads people toward corruption, giving rise to sin. In Christian theology, it is acknowledged that humans have fallen due to sin, their minds darkened, and their wills weakened. These factors are vividly revealed in "Thunderstorm."

Clearly, Cao Yu firmly places the origin of human corruption and sin in the pursuit of irrational carnal desires, which is the thematic essence of the entire play and represents Cao Yu's most successful transformation of desire into tragedy. Each of the eight characters in the drama possesses strong will and erotic desires, each calculating their own pursuits, and even engaging in bold actions, ultimately leading to the tragedy.

### 2.1.1 Original Sin in "Thunderstorm"

According to the Christian doctrine of original sin, all of humanity carries an inherent original sin from birth, and they are unable to save themselves. Since humans have sinned, they need to pay a price for redemption. However, they are incapable of compensating for their sins on their own. Therefore, God sends His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for humanity, shedding His precious blood to redeem the sins of believers. Only by believing in Jesus Christ can one be free from all sins.

The burden of original sin is inescapable and reflects itself in individual life forms as fate. In "Thunderstorm," Cao Yu creates a world full of sin and depicts souls burdened with guilt and suffering. In his portrayal, fate is likened to a cruel well, once fallen inside, one can hardly escape the darkness of the pit.<sup>[3]</sup>

Through a close reading and analysis of the text, the initial manifestation of original sin in the Zhou family is evident in the relationship between Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping. Zhou Puyuan, belonging to the upper class of the feudal society, loves Lu Shiping, who comes from the lower class of laborers. The pressures and interests of his social class dictate Zhou Puyuan's decisions. Under the pressure of the matriarch of the Zhou family, he is forced to send Lu Shiping away in order to hastily marry a wealthy lady from a reputed family. As a result, their next generation also faces destruction due to their parents' sins. Thus, Zhou Puyuan's initial wrongdoing can be seen as a form of original sin. Zhou Ping, Zhou Chong, Sifeng, and the other children are innocent, but they bear the consequences of the "karmic retribution" that stems from their parents' original sin. In this way, the repeated mention of "divine will" by Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping in "Thunderstorm" fully illustrates the catastrophic consequences of original sin.

### 2.1.2 Actual Sin in "Thunderstorm"

In the Christian doctrine, actual sins are classified into two types based on their nature and intent: sins committed with intention and sins committed out of ignorance or unintentionally. The former type of sin arises from the expansion of personal desires and the pursuit of selfish interests, exhibiting the evil aspects of human nature. The latter type of sin, committed out of ignorance or unintentionally, results from the limitations inherent in human beings' ability to comprehend certain uncertain factors in life, representing the uncertainty and mystery of fate. In my view, the "actual sins" committed by the Zhou family mainly revolve around two points:

Firstly, Zhou Puyuan's intentional acts of wrongdoing are evident. The worker representative, Lu Dahai, exposes Zhou Puyuan's sins in the play, revealing that for the sake of acquiring a "heirless fortune," Zhou Puyuan "ordered the police to kill many miners" and "intentionally drowned 2,200 laborers, fining 300 yuan for each life." Zhou Puyuan deliberately caused the death of so many workers to safeguard his own interests. In order to pacify the protesting workers, he manipulated the three leaders and made them sign contracts, which became the bloody history of Zhou Puyuan's wealth accumulation. As a cruel mine owner driven by avarice, his sins were committed with the intent of fulfilling his desires.

Furthermore, the most prominent sin in the entire play is the act of adultery committed by Fanyi and Zhou Ping. In Christian doctrine, incest is considered a grave sin. In the "Book of Leviticus" in the Old Testament, Christians are warned that those who commit adultery with their stepmothers have dishonored their fathers and should be put to death, and their sins shall be upon them. In "Thunderstorm," Fanyi, as Zhou Ping's stepmother, is an agitated woman. The oppressive atmosphere in Zhou's mansion suffocates her, leading her to engage in an incestuous relationship with her stepson, who is six years younger. This act is against the teachings of the Bible and the spirit of Christianity, and as a result, Fanyi later suffers from mental disorder as a punishment. For Zhou Ping, "remorse seized his heart," and he attempts to escape from the inner condemnation. To break free from the sinful relationship with his mother, he turns to the relationship with Sifeng, a young and beautiful maid in the Zhou household, seeking redemption for his soul and attempting to cleanse himself with a new soul. Little does he know that Sifeng is his half-sister, which plunges Zhou Ping into even greater sin. Eventually, Zhou Ping is punished by God, ending his life through suicide. His final lament to his father, "You shouldn't have given birth to me," implies a lamentation for the sinful consequences brought about by original sin, as interpreted by Cao Yu.

### 2.2 Redemption Consciousness in "Thunderstorm"

In the Christian doctrine, redemption teaches that all of humanity is born with original sin and is unable to save themselves. Since humans have committed sins, they need to pay the price for redemption. Unable to compensate for their sins on their own, God sent His son Jesus Christ to suffer and shed his precious blood to redeem the sins of believers. Only by believing in Jesus Christ can one be absolved of all sins. In the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ exemplifies forgiveness and love by pardoning Judas, the traitor, and even praying for those who tormented him while being crucified. His mercy, compassion, and love made him the Savior of mankind, and selfless devotion is considered a testament to the spirit of Christ.

The theme of redemption in "Thunderstorm" is most evident in the character of Zhou Chong. Zhou Chong is portrayed as an angelic figure in the play, assigned by Cao Yu to embody the mission of redemption, acting as the messenger of God's will or the spirit of Christ. His kindness reflects a deeper sense of atonement, as he seeks self-improvement by attempting to change Sifeng's situation. Initially, the gentle and naive Zhou Chong tries to persuade his tyrannical father, Zhou Puyuan, and even aims to change Sifeng's social status by helping her gain the opportunity to read



and write. However, Zhou Chong's pursuit of Sifeng leads him into a cycle of "original sin" and "punishment." He fearlessly shows his compassion to Sifeng, but his well-intentioned actions eventually result in self-sacrifice. Zhou Chong's innocent nature, his compassion, and sense of responsibility lead him to bear excessive atonement for his father, mother, and brother, as well as for his social class. However, his pursuit of atonement and its consequences ironically exacerbate his sins. Zhou Chong, the apostle of God created by Cao Yu, bears the weight of saving sinful souls and purifies the audience and readers' souls through subtle and aesthetic means.

Furthermore, the theme of redemption in "Thunderstorm" is also reflected in the "prologue" and "epilogue." These two scenes are set in a church hospital, which was formerly the Zhou family mansion, where human sins were manifested. After his wife's insanity, Zhou Puyuan donates the property to the church hospital. This act itself carries profound meaning, as Zhou Puyuan not only converted to Christianity for atonement but also donated the Zhou mansion to do good deeds. This demonstrates his expression of self-redemption. In both of these scenes, the Christian elements of the Bible, the cross, and nuns create a strong atmosphere of Christian redemption throughout the play. In the prologue and epilogue, Zhou Puyuan, representing "original sin," enters the church, listens to the recitation of the Bible and the Mass, and the entire play seems like a person in his twilight years repenting for the sins committed in this lifetime. This further intensifies the presence of Christian redemption in "Thunderstorm."

### 2.3 Repentance Consciousness in "Thunderstorm"

The concept of repentance encompasses three levels: superficially, it involves a self-condemning mindset; internally, it includes a rational self-denial analysis; and profoundly, it involves a motivation for self-transcendence. Essentially, repentance is a religious act, and the idea of repentance is rooted in the concept of "original sin." Therefore, repentance is a vivid expression of religious spirit.

Christian doctrine places significant emphasis on the consciousness of "repentance." Since original sin is unavoidable, God's people can only be conscious of their sins and move away from evil by continuously repenting and seeking redemption. Through constant repentance and atonement, they can redeem their souls, free themselves from the suffering of original sin, and ultimately open the gates to heaven. Repenting for one's own sins to seek God's forgiveness and improving one's real-life and moral conscience are essential spiritual elements in the Christian tradition. This idea of repentance finds ample confirmation in the characters and plot of "Thunderstorm."

The characters in "Thunderstorm" display various levels of repentance consciousness. For instance, Zhou Puyuan's act of donating the Zhou mansion to the church hospital after his wife's insanity can be seen as a form of repentance. By converting to Christianity and making a charitable donation, he seeks self-redemption and atonement for his past sins as a cruel mine owner. Similarly, Zhou Chong, the angelic figure in the play, embodies a profound sense of repentance. He seeks redemption by trying to change Sifeng's fate, attempting to alleviate the suffering caused by his family's sins. His selfless actions demonstrate a desire for self-transcendence and atonement for his family's wrongdoings.

The theme of repentance also appears in the character of Sifeng. Her guilt and remorse for her love affair with Zhou Chong reflect a form of repentance for the sin she committed. She is tormented by the knowledge that Zhou Chong is her half-brother and cannot escape the consequences of her actions. This inner turmoil and the desire to seek redemption show the presence of repentance consciousness in her character.

Overall, the concept of repentance is prevalent throughout "Thunderstorm," with various

characters grappling with the consequences of their sins and seeking redemption for their actions. This reflects the significant influence of Christian repentance in shaping the play's themes and character motivations.

### 2.3.1 The Repentance of Zhou Puyuan

In Christian thought, "acknowledgment of sin" and "repentance" are essential terms that involve multiple relationships between individuals and God, as well as between individuals themselves, leading to spiritual conversion. Before God, everyone is a sinner with dual heavy sins and should face punishment. In "Thunderstorm," with the death of the three young people, three lonely elders are left behind, and at this point, survival becomes about repentance and redemption for them. Based on an artistic creation model rooted in Christian ethical consciousness: "evil" - "destruction" - "good," Cao Yu designed Zhou Puyuan to undergo a transformation from "evil" to "repentance" in terms of human nature. From the script, it is evident that Zhou Puyuan created what seemed to be the "most complete and orderly family." However, since he abandoned Shiping thirty years before, his conscience has been burdened with intense self-condemnation. He likes to wear old clothes, use old furniture, and maintains the habit of "closing windows," all as a way to commemorate the servant girl Shiping whom he once loved but was driven away by the old lady. Zhou Puyuan's behavior is rooted in a sense of guilt and self-condemnation, reflecting a repentant mindset.

Furthermore, Zhou Puyuan's repentance behavior is also evident in his torment of Sifeng. Forcing her to see doctors and take medication, claiming she is insane and immersed in his supposed nostalgia for Shiping, all stem from the motivation to save his soul. All of this reveals Zhou Puyuan's humanity not yet extinguished; it represents an external manifestation of his guilt-ridden and repentant psyche. However, Zhou Puyuan's approach is one of oppressing and enslaving others. He tries to atone for himself in this way, but he only adds to his own sins, distancing himself further from the path of repentance.

The death of his son and the insanity of his wife make Zhou Puyuan realize that the material "happiness" and wealth he pursued in the past are unreliable, and the various crimes he committed are shameful. He starts acknowledging his sins and embarks on the path of repentance. He atones with material possessions, selling the Zhou family mansion to the church hospital. He atones with actions, spending a whole decade searching for his and Lu Shiping's son, Lu Dahai, whom he had forced away, in an attempt to awaken Shiping's long-lost memories. Finally, under the guidance of the church clergy "Gu Yi," he listens to the voice of God, converts to Christianity, and devoutly repents. In deep repentance, he bears the severe consequences of his tragic fate.

It can be said that as a pivotal character in "Thunderstorm," Zhou Puyuan is the harbinger of destruction. Cao Yu kept him alive for a reason. According to the Book of Ezekiel, Chapter 33, in the Old Testament of the Bible: "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways." <sup>[4]</sup>Thus, in Cao Yu's portrayal, Zhou Puyuan survives instead of perishing. If approaching this from the perspective of traditional Chinese drama, a person who commits grave sins would undoubtedly meet his demise, while the other victims would receive a happy ending and reconciliation. This notion reflects the secular philosophy of "good reaps good, evil begets evil" and the concept of karma. However, the teachings of Christianity diverge from this view. The prophets of Christianity believe that "punishing evil" is merely a means of saving souls, and "encouraging goodness" is the true purpose. If Zhou Puyuan were to die in "Thunderstorm," the Christian spirit imbued in the play would not be manifested and exalted. Thus, Cao Yu allowed him to live so that he could repent and, through his existence, emphasize God's boundless love and glorify His grace.

### 2.3.2 The Repentance of Zhou Ping

Zhou Ping is the illegitimate child born of Zhou Puyuan and Lu Shiping's clandestine affair. In commemoration of their romance, Zhou Puyuan bestowed upon his son the name Zhou Ping. As Zhou Ping matured, he found himself unable to resist the allure of his stepmother, Yan Yan, thus engaging in a lamentable act of incestuous liaison. Subsequently, he was overcome by profound remorse and regret, leading him to seek solace in alcohol, rendering his temperament volatile, even prompting his pilgrimage to foreign cathedrals. In a bid to redeem himself, Zhou Ping turned his focus toward pursuing Sifeng, yearning to find a new paramour to cleanse his soul, only to tragically repeat the cycle by committing further egregious acts of sibling incestuous relations.

In the play, Zhou Ping's penitential behavior can be considered relatively direct. After engaging in an incestuous relationship with her stepmother, Ziyi, she remains deeply remorseful. This remorse is expressed through Zhou Chong's words in the drama: "But my brother has changed; he drinks heavily, becomes violent, and sometimes he even goes to foreign churches for reasons unknown." "Finally, he suddenly said he once loved a woman he should never have loved!" Zhou Ping's drinking to drown her sorrows and her irritable temperament are manifestations of her inner anguish. She seeks to cleanse her soul through religious penance, aiming for liberation and transcendence.

Throughout the play, Zhou Ping is acutely aware that her adultery with her stepmother is an unforgivable sin, and his heart is filled with fear. He desperately tries to break free from Fan Yi's entanglement, aiming to distance himself from sin and attain self-redemption for her soul. However, Fan Yi clings to him relentlessly. Therefore, in a bid to save himself, Zhou Ping shifts his attention to pursuing Si Feng. His actions in securing her tuition fees, among other things, demonstrate his desire to cleanse himself by rescuing a new soul. Zhou Ping's decision to leave home is not only an escape from his emotional entanglement with Fan Yi but also an expression of his repentance for his original sin.

## 3. The Influence of Christianity and the Spirit of the Bible on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature

### 3.1 Historical Development

Christianity, as the most influential theistic religion in the world, was introduced to China during the Tang Dynasty. However, its spread and impact remained quite limited for a significant period of time. It was only after the Opium War, when foreign powers intensified their colonial rule over the Chinese nation, that China was compelled to embark on modernization. The traditional cultural system, centered around Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, faced disintegration, and the emergence of new beliefs and values became an inevitable requirement for historical development. It was at this juncture that Christianity resurged and surged eastward with considerable breadth and profound influence.

Various factors, such as the nation's historical and cultural heritage, the transformation of modern society, the literary revolution, and the dissemination of Christianity, jointly contributed to the portrayal of Christian characters in modern Chinese literature. This portrayal involved authors from both the religious and literary realms and encompassed multiple literary genres, such as novels, essays, poetry, and dramas. The portrayal featured diverse figures such as Jesus, pastors, priests, and believers, leaving a profound impact on modern and contemporary Chinese literature.

The New Culture Movement, to a certain extent, can be regarded as the Enlightenment in Chinese literature. Through a rational and critical lens, it reexamined tradition, advocated independence, freedom, and equality, and celebrated individuality, personal rights, and values. It was the prevailing literary trend of that era. Subsequently, the Chinese people's widespread



engagement with the Bible began, and some modern writers viewed it as a literary work, gradually transforming the Bible into a spiritual refuge for certain authors.

Chen Duxiu once remarked that “we need not consult any theology, rely on any religious rituals, or lean on any denominations. We directly knock on Jesus' door, seeking to unite his sublime and magnificent personality and fervent, profound emotions with our own.”<sup>[5]</sup> In this context, Christianity was initially perceived not merely as a religion but rather as a culture. Similarly, the Bible was not initially regarded as a divinely inspired and unchangeable sacred book but rather as a work that could be freely interpreted and edited by individuals.

The Bible, as the foundation of Christian doctrine, embodied the spirit of Jesus' universal love and sacrifice, influencing many writers and infusing their literary characters with distinct Christian undertones. Modern writers drew upon the available spiritual resources from the Christian persona, undergoing a process of twists and turns, eventually developing their own unique spiritual content. Gradually, this content became interwoven into the fabric of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, becoming an indispensable and integral component of Chinese literary expression.

As writers delve deeper into their understanding of the stories within the Bible, its texts have become a source of inspiration for many authors' literary creations. In modern and contemporary works, numerous pieces feature epigraphs directly quoting passages from the Bible, serving as guiding principles that articulate the essence of the articles. In Cao Yu's play "Thunderstorm," for instance, he incorporates seven direct passages from the Bible, rendering the entire drama akin to a penitential prayer by Zhou Puyuan. Similarly, in Ba Jin's novel "Fires," Zhang Ziping's novel "Children of God," Yang Gang's novel "Challenge," Xu Dishan's novel "The Vain Labor of a Spider," Su Xuelin's novel "Thorny Heart," and various other works, one can observe a considerable use of direct quotations from the Bible.

Furthermore, the renowned writer Mao Dun also based two of his works, "The Death of Jesus" and "Samson's Revenge," on biblical content. In Wang Meng's "On the Cross," he narrates an alternative story of Jesus Christ, representing his own imaginative and interpretative perspective of the figure. Such reimagining by the authors entails a subversion of the image of Jesus, even though numerous plot elements are drawn from the Bible. Within the process of character portrayal, the authors offer distinctive interpretations.

### 3.2 Limitations

Chinese writers of the 20th century grew up in the environment of traditional Chinese culture, and thus, they lack the profound devotion to Christian culture that is often found in Western writers. The transition from divinity to humanity marks the entry of Christian culture into modern Chinese literature, and it represents the dominant shift from religious ethical discourse to secular ethical discourse. A further issue arises when Christian ethics, particularly the discourse on humanity, becomes involved in the construction of the personas of modern Chinese writers. From the creation of God to the creation of man, from Jesus' burden to man's responsibility, from God's boundless love to what man perceives as God's love, from repentance for original sin to human remorse, 20th-century Chinese literature, in its process of embracing Christian thought, often lost the core essence of Christianity and instead replicated its external forms of Christian works.

Following the "New Culture Movement," most Chinese writers absorbed Christianity primarily from a cultural standpoint. Many of them did not harbor a genuine interest in Christianity itself. Even those who once converted to Christianity ultimately became enamored with the literary form of the Bible or embraced the humanitarian spirit they perceived within their understanding of Christianity. Therefore, the Chinese writers' comprehension of Christian culture is inherently limited, and the Christian spirit reflected in their literary works is subjectively selective, incapable of fully and accurately capturing the profound essence of Christian culture.

## 4. Conclusion

With a deep sense of curiosity and exploration towards life, Cao Yu devoted five years to the creation and conceptualization of "Thunderstorm," boldly intertwining the essence of Christian spirit with literature. As he himself stated, "Writing 'Thunderstorm' was an urgent emotional need."

From the perspective of Christian spirit, the exploration of "Thunderstorm" undeniably confirms that it is not a simple work but rather a remarkable masterpiece infused with profound Christian humanistic consciousness. It allegorically reflects the light and shadow of human nature, alluding to biblical teachings and imparting profound moral lessons. Therefore, interpreting the Christian connotations of "Thunderstorm" cannot overlook the teachings of the Bible. Through the teachings of the Bible, Cao Yu skillfully interweaves human desires and sins to inspire and admonish the world.

It is worth noting that Cao Yu approaches the portrayal of sin with a compassionate heart, allowing for the possibility of forgiveness and illuminating a glimmer of hope within a world tainted by transgressions. This exemplifies Cao Yu's philosophical outlook and religious sentiments. If the design of "Thunderstorm" were to exclude the essence of Christian spirit, the thematic depth of the play would diverge from Cao Yu's original artistic aspiration and sensibilities during the time of its creation.

From this, it is evident that Christian culture in modern Chinese literature embodies a universal cultural consciousness that transcends borders and encompasses all of humanity. The personal strength, moral critique, ideals of love, and humanitarianism inherent in Christianity constitute an essential part of the core spirit in modern Chinese literature. Simultaneously, within the reimagining by contemporary Chinese writers, Christian culture has experienced a process of sinicization, possessing eternal aesthetic and cultural value.

Modern Chinese literary works extensively incorporate quotations and passages from the Christian Bible, either as epigraphs or interspersed within the text, giving rise to a phenomenon of "Biblical quotations" and "adaptations." As writers deepen their understanding of the stories within the Bible, its texts have become a source of inspiration for many authors' literary creations. Numerous modern works feature direct citations of original biblical verses as epigraphs, serving as guiding principles that articulate the essence of the articles.

In conclusion, the spiritual essence of Christian thought and the narrative content, as well as artistic techniques present in the Bible, have had a significant impact on the ideology and selection of themes in modern Chinese literary creation. They have expanded the spiritual realm of modern Chinese literature, deepened its spiritual connotations, enriched its artistic practices, and injected vitality into the field. Despite the subjectivity influenced by the social background and individual choices, the expression of Christian culture in these literary works does have certain limitations. Nevertheless, through analyzing the influence of the Bible on modern Chinese literary creation, readers can more accurately grasp the connection between Christianity and modern Chinese literature, which is of paramount importance in exploring new horizons for the development of modern Chinese literature.

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