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## Chinese Christian communism in the early twentieth century

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### ABSTRACT

This article deals with a unique period in Chinese Christianity in the early twentieth century. During this period a number of Christian theologians engaged actively with communism and Marxist theory. We focus on the work of Wu Leichuan (1870–1944), Wu Yaozong (1893–1979) and Zhu Weizhi (1905–1999), who creatively sought engagements between Christianity and historical materialism and thereby articulated a unique Chinese development, albeit engaged with international currents of thought. The article analyses their varying methods of doing so, their reconstructions of the figure of Jesus and early Christianity, and the efforts to see both the links and differences between Christianity and communism.

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In the future, when we deal with Christianity, we need to have a keen awareness and understanding of it, so that there will be no more confusions. What is more, we need to have a rather deep understanding, so that we can cultivate in our veins the lofty and great character of Jesus, as well as his affectionate and profound compassion, so that we may be saved from falling into the horrible, dark and dirty pit (Chen 2009, 70).<sup>1</sup>

Chen Duxiu, from whom this quotation is taken, was, along with Li Dazhao, one of the founders of the Communist Party of China (Tang 2012). He expresses an appreciation of Christianity, especially in terms of the revolutionary credentials of Jesus Christ, which was not an exception in the early years of the twentieth century in China. Indeed, he would have found such an interpretation of a revolutionary Jesus, with variations, among a number of Chinese Christian thinkers. These include Wu Leichuan, Shen Sizhuang (J. Wesley Shen), Wu Yaozong (Y. T. Wu), Zhu Weizhi (W.T. Chu) and Zhao Zizhen (T. C. Chao), who formed part of what may be called a distinctly Chinese form of Christian socialism. They thought, wrote and acted in a turbulent and creative time. Not only did the imperial system come to an end with the republican revolution of 1911, and not only was it the time of the hugely influential May Fourth Movement (*wu si*), but it was also the period when the Communist Party of China was formed. We focus on three of those thinkers, Wu Leichuan (1870–1944), Wu Yaozong (1893–1979) and Zhu Weizhi

(1905–1999), seeking to identify their responses to the challenges of communism and the genuine breakthroughs they produced.<sup>2</sup>

## Revolutionary times and influences

Before proceeding, a few comments on background are needed in order to highlight the specifics of the Chinese situation relevant to our study. Three factors are important. First, Christianity had been undergoing a long process of sinification<sup>3</sup> at least since the time of Matteo Ricci in the sixteenth century, the ‘rites controversy’ and struggles over the choice for the name of God (Reilly 2004, 19–53).<sup>4</sup> This history was subsequently sidelined with Protestant missionary activity in the nineteenth century. Based in Hong Kong and enmeshed with opium trade in an ever-shifting and complex fashion, Christianity gained the association with the humiliation of China by European imperialism and was seen by many Chinese as a colonial ideology (*yang jiao*). The opium wars, the destruction of the summer palace in Beijing, the imposition of unfavourable economic conditions and the religious ideology of a foreign empire – these and more became signals of that humiliation.

Second, and in contrast to the connection with European colonialism, Christianity had already been associated with revolutionary activity. We mean the Taiping Revolution of 1850–1864, which both marks the arrival of the revolutionary Christian tradition in China and has been described as China’s first modern revolution (Amin 2013; Boer 2016). The Taiping Revolution exhibited features known from the European form of the revolutionary religious tradition: the radical, heterodox interpretation of the Bible, according to which the whole imperial system had broken God’s (*Shangdi*) laws, was therefore considered blasphemous and idolatrous; the revolutionary uprising fostered by such engagement, as a way of voicing deep resistance to oppression by landlords, the state and foreign intervention; the modes of communal life instituted by the Taiping, including abolition of former classes, relative gender equality and property in common. Additionally, Christianity was thoroughly ‘indigenised’ or ‘contextualised’, producing a new form of radical Christianity that was popular among peasants, miners and national minorities. In all this, it challenged the age-old justification of imperial rule and set the scene for the demise not only of the Qing dynasty but of the imperial system as such. Although the Taiping movement threatened to topple the Qing Dynasty, it was prevented from doing so by foreign intervention.<sup>5</sup> But the Taiping revolutionaries were certainly not forgotten. Many involved in the 1911 revolution consciously invoked the Taiping, with some letting their hair grow long like their revolutionary forebears. Their leader, Sun Yat-sen, was known by the nickname of Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the Taiping movement. Sun Yat-sen too identified as a Christian (although so did Chiang Kai-shek).

Therefore, Christianity already had a rather ambivalent presence in China by the early twentieth century. Thus far we have a submerged history of the two sides of Christianity in China (from above), between the connections with Protestant missions and European colonialism, and the outburst of the revolutionary religious tradition (which includes sinification from below).

Now a third factor comes into play, which was the immediate trigger for the theological developments of Wu Leichuan, Wu Yaozong and Zhu Weizhi. This was the

'anti-Christian movement' between 1922 and 1928.<sup>6</sup> It responded primarily to the perception that Christianity was wedded to European colonialism. Thus, it sought government control of the Christian schools throughout China and questioned the loyalty of Chinese Christians. Were they really covert agents of the imperialism and colonialism which had so humiliated China? Indeed, was Christianity part of the problem? Christian thinkers and leaders found themselves called upon to make a clear identification of their allegiance: for the Chinese revolution or for foreign imperialism and its values (Zhang 1929). A number of Christian thinkers made it clear that they did indeed support the revolution and were opposed to foreign imperialism.<sup>7</sup> They did so in a novel way, holding onto their Christianity and identifying with the revolution.

But they faced a dilemma: on which of the threads should they draw? Obviously, the connection with European colonialism was not an option, but should they claim the heritage of Matteo Ricci or of the Taiping revolutionaries? Both could be seen as forms of the sinification of Christianity, from above and from below. They chose neither. Instead, they opted for an approach that drew together Christianity and Marxism, now within a Chinese situation and in response to Chinese social, political and ideological issues that pertained to China. They were able to draw upon a precedent, especially Karl Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity* (Kautsky [1908a] 2007, [1908b] 1977), the immense impact of which in different parts of the world we still have not assessed adequately. As the first study of Christian origins, if not the Bible as a whole, from a Marxist perspective, the work was a breakthrough. Taking up the mantle passed on to him by Engels ([1894–95] 1990a, [1894–95] 1972b),<sup>8</sup> Kautsky reconstructed the social and economic contexts of both the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and New Testament, arguing that they were forms of slave society. He located the early Christians in the context of Roman imperial rule and the imposition of a slave mode of production. Given its opposition to such oppression, the early Christians (along with other similar movements) attracted the lowest classes, the slaves, disenfranchised peasants and out-of-work town labourers. Even more, according to Kautsky, the early Christians established a form of communism (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35), although it was a communism of consumption and not production. Even if this particular type of communism did not last, since it did not change the mode of production, the impulse remained in Christianity. It appeared later at various moments, such as the monastic movement of the fourth century, the many radical communities and revolutionary movements of the European Middle Ages, and the Peasant Revolution led by Thomas Münzer in the sixteenth century (Kautsky 1897, [1895–97] 1976a, [1895–97] 1976b; Boer 2014b).

More than a century later, the limits of Kautsky's analysis are clear, but we are interested in its impact on the Chinese Christian socialists. Here we see a process in which international debates concerning the rich intersections of Marxism and Christianity – fostered by the works of Engels and Kautsky – were drawn into a Chinese situation for the reasons outlined above.<sup>9</sup> Kautsky's book was translated into Chinese in 1932 and, as one of the few books on Christianity available in China at the time, it became a must-read work for both Christians and Marxists (Kautsky 1932).<sup>10</sup> Its impact was almost immediately felt in Shen Sizhuang's *A New History of Socialism* (1934), as well as the work of Wu Leichuan and Zhu Weizhi. For Wu Leichuan, a key idea drawn from Kautsky is the early Christian communist practice of having 'everything in common' (from Acts 2 and 4), which means a provision of the basic necessities of life for all

through a just distribution of wealth (Wu 1936, 104–5). In such a society, taxation would be unnecessary, a position he found in the sayings of Jesus and Peter concerning tax (Luke 20:25; Acts 3:1–10).<sup>11</sup> In the Gospels he found parables aplenty which criticised acquisitiveness and love of private property, although he focused on the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son (Luke 15:1–32).<sup>12</sup> And when the crowds following John the Baptist asked him what they should do, he replied as follows: ‘Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise’ (Luke 3:11). In short, the application of these teachings meant a just and fair society, which was coterminous with socialism.

Zhu Weizhi’s deployment of Kautsky was even more extensive, especially in a work to which we will return, *Jesus the Proletarian* (Zhu 1950). He is quite explicit about the way Kautsky’s work enabled him to understand not only the nature of the proletariat but also who Jesus was (Zhu 1950, 3).<sup>13</sup> Zhu reiterates Kautsky’s main points concerning early Christianity, while also taking up Kautsky’s analysis of the Hebrew Bible to argue that the Exodus from Egypt was a revolutionary movement: ‘The God they believed in helped them gain emancipation from oppression at the hands of their Egyptian masters’ (Zhu 1950, 28). This history began with the Exodus, includes the Hebrew prophets (30) and Jesus, only to be manifested in Marx and Lenin. All of this was captured in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). The act of self-sacrificing assistance from an ethnically despised person – a Samaritan – given to a man who has been attacked on the road and left for dead indicates that the ‘true mark of internationalism’ is found in the idea that ‘class solidarity overcomes ethnic chauvinism’ (Zhu 1950, 85). In other words, Christianity was an international movement, of the same type as the international proletarian movement, which would achieve its goal of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth (Zhu 1950, 27).<sup>14</sup> The proletariat – as Kautsky and Engels argued – has a natural connection with Christianity, so much so that one of the epithets for Jesus, Emmanuel (‘God with us’) means ‘God stands with the proletariat’ (Zhu 1950, 3).

## Christianity and communism

The engagement with Kautsky has already introduced some initial connections between Christianity and communism, so let us examine this topic more extensively in the work of our three theologians. Our focus is on three related areas: the various methods used, namely a proletarian perspective, historical materialism and a comparative approach (via Mozi); the reconstructions of Jesus and early Christianity; and the question of identity and difference between communism and Christianity.

### Method

The approaches used by Zhu Weizhi, Wu Yaozong and Wu Leichuan are broadly similar, but they have their own emphases. Thus, Zhu Weizhi deploys what he calls a proletarian perspective in order to understand the Jesus movement and early Christianity. This is coupled with a common Christian practice of arguing that the subsequent developments entailed many accretions which ran counter to the original impulse. These additions have distorted Christianity, forcing it to deviate and even betray its original form. To judge Christianity on the basis of its current shape entails misunderstanding its

nature, much as one would misinterpret capitalism if one were to assess its nature on the basis of its present shape. Zhu uses the image of a tree: 'On a huge flourishing tree there inevitably can be found a few withered leaves and branches, but it would be incorrect to take them as evidence that the tree is dead' (1950, 2). While this approach is familiar to the long history of the church, with one reform or revolutionary movement after another claiming to return to the original form of Christianity, Zhu gives it a distinct twist in a Chinese context. Against those who sought to dismiss Christianity as foreign teaching, as a tool and indeed a basis of European culture and its imperialism, Zhu argues that such an assessment is misguided. It understands Christianity only in its European, capitalist form, which is a distortion. By contrast, a proletarian perspective – drawn from Kautsky – enables the interpreter to remove the distorting accretions and recover the original, proletarian nature of Christianity. In this light, Zhu seeks to recover the proletarian revolutionary credentials of Jesus, which had been divorced from his religious role and quietly dismissed. This meant that Jesus's criticisms of his own situation were not merely religious but also targeted the social and economic conditions which produced such problems. In other words, Jesus clearly identified with the oppressed, urging them to seek liberation not only from the local ruling class but also from the foreign ruling class that oppressed them. Zhu's argument contains an implicit dialectic, in which one removes the specific form of Christianity (its European accretions) for the sake of a more universal core (religious and socio-economic criticisms of oppression), which can then be seen as relevant for a Chinese situation, for there too oppression exists in the form of landlords over peasants and international colonial capital over China itself. This dialectic is the way Marxism also became relevant in China, based on a universal principle of liberation from oppression but applied to a Chinese situation.

The approach of Wu Yaozong, founder of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TPSM),<sup>15</sup> was slightly different, drawing upon historical materialism in three respects.<sup>16</sup> To begin with, he saw it as a valuable tool to analyse social and economic conditions. Further, he sought to develop a materialist epistemology in order to appreciate the freedom and equality at the core of Christianity. In this way, class conflict would be eliminated and the value of human beings respected. Finally, he described materialism as a holistic approach, which enabled one to understand reality in all its diversity so that one might know how to transform the world. On this matter, Christianity had a crucial role to play: it is concerned with the individual *and* society, with the love of God *and* human beings, with the Gospel *and* social conditions (Wu 1934, 27, 29, 32).

By contrast, Wu Leichuan approached his interpretation of Jesus through the figure of the lower class artisan, Mozi (470–391 BCE).<sup>17</sup> Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, the revival of Mohism offered a challenge to the dominant Confucianism. In doing so, the revival had to overcome the earlier efforts – by Mencius and other Confucians – to align Mozi's thought with that of Confucius, although the alignment required a sidelining of Mozi's attacks on Confucius. The early Chinese communists also found Mohism appealing, since it challenged Confucian nostalgia and the embrace of harmony and universal love (*boai*) within the existing – and thereby hierarchical – forms of human relations.<sup>18</sup> For Mozi, universal love (*jian'ai*) was non-differentiated and community oriented, rather than being focused narrowly on family and clan.<sup>19</sup>

Wu Leichuan's *Mozi and Jesus* (1940) arose from this context, in which it was not uncommon to find close connections between the two, seeing them as materialist and

socialist movements, or even regarding Mozi simultaneously as a minor Christ and a Marxist before his time. The deployment of Mozi evinces a dialectic similar to that used by Zhu Weizhi. Mozi was a universalist who sought to transcend the specificity of a Chinese cultural and political context, saturated as it was with Confucian ethics. So was the form of Christianity Wu sought to recover, for the mission of a just society championed by Jesus transcended the specific form it had taken as it was adapted to a European situation. In other words, Christianity was not indelibly 'western', but was able to be indigenised in each situation where injustice and oppression existed. Like Mohism, Christianity was all the more relevant to the Chinese situation precisely because of its universal mission. Thus, through Mozi, Wu Leichuan found a way of representing Jesus as a revolutionary on a mission from God to bring about the Kingdom on earth.<sup>20</sup> This meant that Christianity had to play a central role in bringing about a just Chinese society. Since economic relations formed the basis of social structures and since political systems arise from that combination (as part of the superstructure), he argued that economic reforms were the key (Wu 1940, 159).

### **Reconstruction**

Despite the variations in method, the results were strikingly similar. Jesus becomes a revolutionary, keen to bring about the Kingdom of God, which would be one of communistic life, economic justice, equality and social well-being. For Zhu Weizhi, Jesus's leadership was simultaneously spiritual and material, seeking to throw off the yoke of foreign powers (Rome), in order to establish a new sociopolitical order. The focus of the movement was Galilee, where Jesus spent most of his ministry, living among the proletariat and becoming deeply familiar with their suffering and aspirations (Zhu 1950, 35, 43). In this way, Galilee became the basis of the revolution, although at a crucial point Jesus decided to lead the movement to Jerusalem, the centre of economic power, religious oppression and imperial authority:

Jesus hailed from Galilee, a region where the proletariat eked out a subsistence-level livelihood; Jerusalem was the centre of the privileged classes, one of whose favourite terms of abuse was 'Galilean pig!' Add to this the fact that he had received no formal religious training whatsoever, and it's easy to see why in the eyes of the social elite he was regarded as uncouth and uneducated (Zhu 1950, 33).

If Jerusalem was the centre of political, economic and religious power, then the Temple was the centre of Jerusalem. Zhu focuses on the two visits by Jesus to the temple, described as 'The First Disturbance' and 'The Final Battle' (Zhu 1950, 36–37). The Temple was simultaneously the key to religion and economic activities, having become an instrument of oppression. Thus, Jesus's focus on the Temple sought to highlight the need to overcome economic exploitation, class conflict and foster a religious revival. The fact that Jesus came to grief in his stern criticisms and indeed disruptive acts (for instance, when he overturned the tables of the money changers) in the Temple in Jerusalem indicates not the failure of the movement but the need for perseverance and sacrifice. When all seems lost, the revolution lives on, as the sayings concerning the mustard seed and the wheat indicate (Matthew 17:20; John 12:24–25).<sup>21</sup> Indeed, they show the power of faith and sacrifice (Zhu 1950, 28, 71, 76).

A significant feature of Zhu's reconstruction is the anti-imperialist nature of Jesus's revolutionary work. Obviously he has in mind China's humiliation at the hands of imperialist European powers, as well as the criticisms of Christianity as an imperialist ideology by many in China. Like Pontius Pilate (the Roman governor who both acquitted Jesus and handed him over to be crucified and who appeared at the opening and closing of *Jesus the Proletarian*), many have misunderstood Jesus. He was far from the champion of any form of imperial power. Instead, he was resolutely opposed to foreign economic and military oppression, leading the proletariat of the time in resisting the Roman Empire. The skill of the Romans was to enlist the ruling classes of its colonial possessions in order to carry out Roman policies (Zhu 1950, 5), much as the European powers had done in China. In this light, Zhu interprets key accounts, such as the three temptations of Jesus by the devil (Matthew 4:1–11) and Caesar's coin (Mark 12:13–17).<sup>22</sup> Concerning the latter, Jesus's answer – 'Give to the emperor the things which are the emperor's, and to God the things which are God's' – should be understood in terms of power: 'Money represents the colonial oppression and exploitation of the Roman Empire. God represents justice, truth, human rights, and benevolence; he stands in solidarity with the oppressed!' (Zhu 1950, 36). Given that the prosperity of Rome was enabled by enslaving the proletariat (Zhu 1950, 23–24), the things which were due to the emperor would be very little, if anything at all. To sum up:

Once the workers of the world were united and of one heart and mind, they would struggle together to establish the Kingdom of Heaven. Whereas the Romans used military force to unite the world, Jesus used the power of the people. In addition to reviving the people's faith in God, he also introduced them to the ideas of justice, human rights, freedom, and universal love. In this way, Jesus strove to liberate all humanity and establish the Kingdom of Heaven (Zhu 1950, 27).

Wu Yaozong's concerns are much broader, attempting to embrace the whole historical reality of Christianity. Yet, we would like to focus on his understanding of Jesus, since this provides a window into the rest of his thought. For Wu Yaozong, the Sermon on the Mount is the key, especially since it featured in his first conversion (the other was to historical materialism [Wu 1948, 95]).<sup>23</sup> This Jesus is shorn of any mystical or miraculous elements; rather, he is entirely realistic and approachable, speaking of crucial human and material issues. Even more, Jesus provides a model not only for this-worldly concerns but also gives us a glimpse into heaven's grandeur. For Wu, this brings him close to none other than Karl Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

I find the personalities of Marx and Jesus alive on the paper. I can also find their similarities and differences. Both are enthusiastic with the vision of a prophet, calling for social justice and the creation of a new heaven and earth for humanity. Both have unsurpassable love and compassion; this is why they are seeing injustice everywhere and do not put up with it. Both are faithful to their belief and died for it (Wu 1934, 127).

The implications for the remainder of Wu Yaozong's thoughts on Christianity and Marxism are far-reaching. Thus, love is revolutionary, so much so that love 'without a revolutionary spirit is not love' (Wu [1948] 1963, 77), although this also means that such love includes a hatred of sin (Wu 1934, 15). Here we can see the reason for his support of class struggle, not so much against Christian reconciliation, but as a necessary and dialectical dimension of reconciliation (Wu 1934, 154–155).<sup>24</sup> Reconciliation entails not



the melding of antagonisms in a grand liberal project, but struggle against oppressors through class struggle and a new level of reconciliation in which the oppressed determine how such reconciliation will be effected. The implication for the struggle against imperialist capitalism should be obvious. The first step is liberation from such oppression, especially in China, for only then would a new world order focused on reconciliation be possible (Wu 1947).

As for Wu Leichuan, this former imperial administrator developed a revolutionary interpretation of Jesus in a manner which – somewhat paradoxically – echoed the traditional Confucian focus on pithy sayings. The core of Jesus’s position may be found in the Lord’s Prayer, which, he argued, contained the essential truth of Christianity and should be recited and, most importantly, contemplated daily (Wu 1940, 302–304). This would enable people to follow in the footsteps of Jesus’s mission, which he saw as an expression of God’s love for humanity. It entailed working for God’s glory, serving the people and bearing witness to truth. In a little more detail, ‘Our father in heaven’ indicates that human beings should love one another, for we are brothers and sisters; ‘Hallowed be your name’ suggests the significance of a universally acknowledged truth; ‘Your kingdom come’ urges all people to work for the improvement of society so that it approaches the Kingdom of God; ‘Your will be done, on earth as in heaven’ instructs human beings to be truthful in all relations; ‘Give us this day our daily bread’ is not a demand but a reminder of the need for contentment; ‘Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors’ tells us to judge others as we would like to be judged by others; ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil’ instructs all people to avoid activities which may divert our path from righteousness and justice. If carried out, these principles would bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, principles which also would reform China into a socialist ‘kingdom’ of freedom, justice and equality (Wu 1925, 1936, 90–92).

For Wu Leichuan, social reform was not opposed to revolution, for when one follows Jesus’s teachings on reform, their ultimate effect is to bring about social revolution. Incremental change would eventually bring about qualitative change. He worked through this position by arguing that the reform programme proposed by Jesus had much in common with socialism, all of which meant that Jesus, like Mozi, was less of a wise sage than a revolutionary. Indeed, other texts from the Gospels reinforce such a position: the fair distribution of material goods to meet people’s daily needs (Mathew 6: 32–33); the abolition of private property so that all property is held in common (Mathew 19:24; Mathew 25:14–30); the radical abolition of family ties, which was a profound challenge in China where such ties remain crucial (Mark 10:29; 3:35; Luke 9:60; 12:51–53; John 16:20–21); all of which required a qualitative change of one’s heart (Wu 1936, 66–72; 1940, 294, 299–300). For Wu Leichuan, these biblical texts indicate that Jesus had a clear plan for transforming society.

However, if we think that Wu’s Jesus was no more than a social revolutionary, then we are mistaken. For Wu, the key was precisely Jesus’s understanding of God as compassionate and his own clear awareness of a divine mission as messiah. His death on the cross indicates that he was far more than a political leader, for not only did he have a divine mission but he refused – unlike Confucius – to seek the favour of worldly politicians (Wu 1936, 47–56). In short, Jesus was a great revolutionary precisely because he was a spiritual leader. Yet, he sought not to establish a new religion but to transform

society, beginning with religious transformation. Wu Leichuan was bold enough to argue that Christianity provided the only way to do so, not only for all humanity but particularly for China. Thus, any church should make revolution its ideal and goal.

### *Identity and difference*

In their different ways, Zhu Weizhi, Wu Yaozong and Wu Leichuan identified closely with what was actually a long tradition of Christian communism. The times suited such a development, particularly in response to the strong anti-Christian and anti-imperial sentiment in China at the time. But did this mean that Christianity and socialism were essentially the same? For Zhu Weizhi, this does seem to be the case. They express the same agenda for qualitative social and economic transformation, becoming comrades in the process. Wu Leichuan took a different approach, aligning reform and revolution. In contrast to the tendency to oppose the two, with one tinkering with the current system and the other seeking to overthrow it and begin again, Wu Leichuan saw, like Lenin ([1917] 1964, 213), that reform should be understood in terms of revolution. However, unlike Lenin ([1905] 1965), he felt that a series of reforms would eventually lead to qualitative and thereby revolutionary change.

Yet, we are most interested in Wu Yaozong, for he maintained two dialectical positions. The first concerns the difference between Christianity and communism. While they both aim to create a society based on freedom and equality (Wu 1949, 17),<sup>25</sup> Christianity holds dear the existence of God<sup>26</sup> and the preference for love over violence, even if the latter becomes necessary at times. Indeed, Christianity and communism arrive at the same conclusion for social transformation but from very different premises. Materialist communism may do so on the basis of the analysis of capitalism and the need for class struggle and revolution, but Christian communism does so from the core doctrines of Christianity and the practice of prayer:

I have realised that Christianity and materialism do not conflict with each other. Moreover, they can complement each other. The reason why I came to this conclusion is based on the basic doctrines of Christianity, especially on God and prayer. I have had a long and deep reflection upon them, offering poignant criticisms as well (Wu [1948] 1963, 98).

The mention of 'poignant criticisms' brings us to the second dimension of the dialectic: Christianity may be revolutionary, but it can also be profoundly reactionary. It may have the resources to struggle with the communists for a new society, but it tends all too often to act as a religion of 'personal spiritual stimulation', becoming an 'opiate for the people, which is to subject to judgment and punishment in due time' (Wu 1949, 183, see also, [1948] 1963, 4). This religion is idealistic, emotional, individualistic and anestheticising (Wu 1934, 100), all too easily providing the 'enslaving toxicants of imperialism' (Wu 1949, 228). But this is only part of the reality of Christianity. Indeed, it embodies this dialectic from within, a political ambivalence which must be recognised and yet turned towards revolution:

We believe that Christianity has a potential, a great potential. It is true that in the past, Christianity had been superstitious, narrow-minded, hypocritical and murderous in various cases, but it is also true that it is a great religion. Its form of organization dates all the way back. Its congregation is huge. It has the spirit of fellowship. As for personal cultivation, it

promotes integrity, innocence, righteousness and selflessness. As a faith, it has always been evolving, renewing and recreating itself. It has seen numerous persecutions and crises, but it always triumphs over failure, pain and death. If it has a clear goal and correct direction, then it has limitless possibility to turn its potentials into reality (Wu 1934, 19).

This is far from any apologetic defence of Christianity, for Wu Yaozong is willing to offer sustained criticisms of the ease with which Christianity sides with and enthusiastically supports one aspiring despot after another (Boer 2014a, 125–206). Yet, he does not rest at this point, siding with the many critics of Christianity in China. He also invokes the other side of the dialectic, insisting that Christianity has been and still can be a revolutionary movement. It does so not by subsuming itself under communism, but by coming from a different perspective.

### **Conclusion: Christianity and Marxism with Chinese characteristics?**

We have presented the positions of Zhu Weizhi, Wu Yaozong and Wu Leichuan in a way which highlights their main contributions to what may be called a Chinese Christian Marxist tradition,<sup>27</sup> which was itself part of a much longer Christian revolutionary tradition. Their positions had a number of outcomes, apart from the immediate one of aligning their proponents with the communists, if not wider revolutionary forces in China. In the context of significant criticisms of Christianity, they attempted to show that their own faith should not be understood merely as an ideology of European imperialism, for its history was much richer than that small slice. In fact, European Christianity had in many respects either distorted the message (Zhu Weizhi and Wu Leichuan), turning it into spiritual support of empire, or emphasised the despotic dimension of a dialectic (Wu Yaozong).

A further outcome concerns how their work may be seen in terms of the sinification of Christianity. Instead of arguing for the direct indigenisation or contextualisation of Christianity, in light of Chinese culture and tradition – a process which had been happening since Matteo Ricci in the sixteenth century – we suggest that it actually took place in a more indirect way. The initial move was to argue for the universal and transcendent credentials of Christianity. It was much more than the European or ‘western’ form it had taken and which many in China had experienced in the nineteenth century. Crucially, this universal perspective was not reduced to other-worldly and spiritual concerns, but was very much concerned with this-worldly problems of oppression and subjugation. The Jesus of their reconstructions was in many respects a revolutionary, challenging the status quo wherever there was injustice and oppression. Once this universalising move was made, it became possible to show how Christianity was exceedingly relevant for a Chinese situation, where internal and international patterns of socio-economic and cultural oppression were urgent matters. In this respect, Christianity had much in common with Marxism, not merely in terms of its revolutionary credentials, but also in terms of its universal appeal that could then be particularised in each location. In this way, Christianity could develop Chinese characteristics, much like Mao first claimed for Marxism.<sup>28</sup> Thus, these radical theologians attempted a re-contextualisation of Christianity in much the same way that was happening with Marxism. We can see this process at work in Wu Yaozong’s central role in establishing

the TPSM and in Wu Leichuan's advocacy from his influential position as vice-president and chancellor at Yenching University (1926–1934). Above all, it took place through their religious commitment and the theological developments we have examined.

But the work of Wu Leichuan, Wu Yaozong and Zhu Weizhi has another implicit, and perhaps unexpected, outcome. In assuming that the Christian revolutionary tradition predates Marxism, let alone the revolutionary movements in China, they also placed Christianity in a more all-embracing position. Marxism and Chinese communism were, therefore, the latest manifestations of a longer tradition, for which Christianity had set and continues to set the agenda. Although they may have argued that Christianity and communism were unique phenomena, alternating between aligning them closely and keeping some dialectical distance between them, the implicit possibility remained that communism would be subsumed by Christianity.

## Notes

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are provided by the authors of this article.
2. The archival work which forms the basis of the present study was undertaken by Chin Kenpa.
3. The term 'sinification' refers to the process of turning Marxism into a Chinese idiom, in light of the long history of Chinese culture and politics. It was first proposed by Mao Zedong in 1940 in his important article 'On New Democracy' (Mao [1940] 2005).
4. Ricci had sought to indigenise Christianity (in its Roman Catholic form) in terms of liturgy, vestments and language, proposing that 'God' (*Yahweh* in Hebrew and *theos* in Greek) be translated with *Shangdi* (Sovereign on High), the name of the ancient Chinese High God. The Pope took a dim view of such proceedings, mandating by papal decree in 1715 that *Tianzhu* (Lord of Heaven) should be used. The rift has led to two Roman Catholic churches in China, one recognised by the state but not by Rome, and the other recognised by Rome but not by the state.
5. As Platt (2012) argues, the British decision to intervene was based on the threat of losing both the North American and Chinese markets. That intervention was crucial, even if it often seemed to follow its own agenda, separate from the Qing forces.
6. Some 20 years earlier, the Boxer (Yihetuan) Rebellion (1899–1901) in the north-east had vented its rage against Chinese Christians.
7. The twist is that later they would be criticised for 'accommodating' to the Communist Party of China, especially after it formed government. For example, concerning Wu Yaozong, these criticisms come from the religious right (Leung 1996; Shen 1989).
8. The correspondence between Engels and Kautsky towards the end of the former's life includes repeated discussions of Engels's thought on the matter and his desire for Kautsky to develop the research further (Engels [1891] 2001a; [1891] 2001b; [1892] 2001a; [1892] 2001b).
9. It was not so much a process of the Marxification of Christianity, or indeed the Christianising of Marxism that was at stake, but rather the complex intersections between the two. See further Boer's *Criticism of Earth* (2012).
10. Engels's 'On the History of Early Christianity' was translated in 1929 and was also read, but it seems to have had less impact than Kautsky's study (Engels 1929).
11. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus's opponents seek to trap him on the question of tax, asking whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor or not. Jesus asks for a coin (denarius) and asks whose image is on it. When they say, 'the emperor's', Jesus replies: 'Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's' (Luke 20:25). In the Book of Acts, the first apostles or leaders of the early Christians, Peter and Paul, are asked by a lame man for alms. Peter replies: 'I have no silver or gold,

- but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk' (Acts 3:6). Translation from the New Revised Standard Version.
12. Each parable has the theme of an unexpected discovery or act, which leads one to put aside all that is valuable in worldly terms. Thus, the shepherd puts aside the well-being of the 99 sheep for the sake of the one that was lost; the woman who loses one of her 10 coins gives her all to find the lost coin, celebrating when it is found; the father who loses his son rejoices when he is found, irrespective of what the son has done.
  13. For example: 'Why did Engels say that the contemporary proletarian movement had much in common with early Christianity? Why did Kautsky have such great respect for Christianity? Why did he see it as one of the most significant movements in human history?' (Zhu 1950, 3). Note also: 'Jesus was a leader of great integrity who led the proletarian masses in the struggle against Roman imperialism. Indeed, Engels himself acknowledges that Christianity began as a revolutionary social movement' (Zhu 1935, 2).
  14. In making his argument, Zhu had recourse to a standard approach by reforming revolutionary movements throughout the history of Christianity: to get rid of distorting accretions which had crept into Christianity over two millennia and recover its core revolutionary message (Zhu 1950, 2).
  15. The TSPM was established in 1951, after working closely with the new communist government, especially Zhou Enlai. The 'three-self' refers to self-government, self-support and self-propagation. The best work on TSPM remains Wickeri's careful study (1988). Needless to say, it has generated significant international controversy, of which Tee (2012, 73–118) provides a useful summary. The successor of Wu Yaozong as chair of the movement was Ding Guangxun or K. H. Ting (Wickeri 2007).
  16. The focus on Wu Yaozong's 'contextual' approach, spiced with an American 'social gospel', significantly plays down the importance of Marxism (Chen 2011). By contrast, some recognise the importance of Marxism in his theology (Ting 1990; Kan 1997, 163–164).
  17. A complete translation of the surviving works of Mozi is now available in Johnston (2010). For the most comprehensive assessment of Wu Leichuan's work in terms of the connections between Jesus and Mozi, see Malek (2004).
  18. Confucianism typically seeks harmony in the context of hierarchy, insofar as the harmony enables the hierarchy to work more smoothly.
  19. Mao Zedong also explored whether Mohism was a form of 'dialectical materialism', although he preferred to connect Mozi and Confucius in these terms (Mao [1939] 2005, 25).
  20. Unfortunately, many works on Wu Leichuan attempt to efface his clear socialist perspective and suggest that his approach is 'Confucian-Christian' and liberal (Chu 1995; Liang 2008; Yieh 2009).
  21. Concerning the mustard seed, Jesus says: 'if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you' (Matthew 17:20). The saying concerning wheat is as follows: 'Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life' (John 12:24–25)
  22. In Matthew 4, Jesus is tempted by the devil while in the wilderness. The devil suggests he turns stones into bread (for Jesus was hungry), to throw himself from the top of the temple and rely on God to save him and finally offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he worships the devil. On each occasion, Jesus resists the devil by quoting from what would become the Hebrew Scriptures.
  23. The most frequently published account appears in the opening paragraphs of 'Christianity and Materialism: Confessions of a Christian'. First published in 1947 in *Daxue yuekan* (*University Monthly*), in its issue of 7 July, it was republished on four occasions, including as an afterword in the fifth edition of *Meiyounen kan jianguo shangdi* (*No One Has Ever Seen God*), published in 1948. This is the version used here.

24. Note also: 'We love peace, but we love justice more. We love people, but we hate sin. We have fiery wrath, but also sincere compassion. We are strict and severe, but also tolerant and open minded' (Wu 1934, 25).
25. 'What Christianity advocates is freedom, equality and democracy in the purest form. Therefore, it should be progressive and revolutionary, which truly embodies the spirit of Jesus. The mission of Christianity today is to transform society where people are treated as slaves and tools into one where the dignity of man is fully upheld, so that human beings will no longer form cliques and fight against each other because of economic interests and class opposition' (Wu 1949, 17).
26. In the 1960s he could still say, 'I can accept 99% of Marxism-Leninism, but when it comes to the question of whether there is a God or not, I keep my own counsel' (quoted by Cao 2011, 139).
27. Kwan's effort to interpret Wu Yaorong and Wu Leichuan under the rubric of postcolonialism has the effect of softening their revolutionary socialist positions (Kwan 2014, 92–123).
28. '*There is no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism. What we call concrete Marxism is Marxism that has taken on a national form, that is, Marxism applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China, and not Marxism abstractly used. Consequently, the sinification of Marxism – that is to say, making certain that in all its manifestations it is imbued with Chinese characteristics, using it according to Chinese peculiarities – becomes a problem that must be understood and solved by the whole Party without delay*' (Mao [1938] 2004, 538–539).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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