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A Chinese Liberation Christology: Jesus, the Redeemer of Sin and Empires

Rene Guo

Introduction

“橘生淮南，橘，生于淮北，枳，叶徒相似，其味不同。”

“Oranges grown south of the Huai River are oranges; once transplanted to the north of the river, they become Zhi. Although they resemble in the shape of leaves, yet they differ widely in taste.”

Annals of Master Yan (晏子春秋 下十)

Chinese farmers, who have plowed the fields and scattered the seeds on their ancestral land for centuries, know this simple logic: mere transplant is doomed to fail. Even a simple orange tree, if it were transplanted to the north across the Huai River, would become no more than a tree of Zhi (枳)—inedible, bitter fruit. While this statement might not be strictly scientific, people’s wisdom sheds a light on the unsuccessful attempts of Western Protestant missions in the nineteenth-century China. These white men carried their crosses of the blue-eyed Aryan Son across the oceans and arrived on the east coast of China with the British East India Company and barrows of opium. They claimed to possess universal ‘civilization,’ to preach ‘good news’ sealed with doctrines, and to speak for ‘salvation’ that takes place in a foreign Jerusalem. They thought that their European mustard seed could become prosperous and fruitful in the occupied womb of Mother Asia, where thousands of native religions had grown prosperously.

This paper suggests that China’s imperial desire and the narratives of Chinese exceptionalism contradict the true humanity revealed by the revelation of Jesus Christ. Any message that ignores the liberation of the silenced from the grips of Sin and Empire is not the Christ’s message. Christianity is a religion of liberation from the sufferings in Sin and Empire. Chinese theologians do not intend to become the translators of Western tradition. The function of Chinese theology is analyzing the meaning of liberation for the silenced people of China and the world, so that they would know that their struggle for healing, justice, and liberation in Empire of the twenty-first century is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The cause of people’s suffering is the evil grip of Sin. The silenced and the oppressed are the victims of Sin. The root of silenced people’s pain is not what Augustine identified as “original sin,” a characteristic of human condition. Rather, Sin is socially struc-

tured violence, domination and exploitation that exist within human relations. Sin is fundamentally relational. Sin emerges and manifests in its diverse forms within different relational contexts to trigger self-destruction or the destruction of others. It deprives people of their capacity to heal themselves through testifying their stories to the Kingdom of God, and to imagine an alternative reality without Sin.

Empire is the prototype of Sin. Empire has an unilateral claim to supremacy and obsession with having the power to control others. Militarism is the weapon of Empire; it protects the illusions of imperial supremacy by threatening the survival of all of humanity. In a world where people are being silenced and oppressed by their governments and foreign empires, Chinese liberation theology seeks to discover the significance of the historical and resurrected Jesus for our struggle for liberation. Christ the Redeemer takes every nation's history in God's own hands and reveals the coming Kingdom of God to human existence, becoming our existential ground, despite our present state of woundedness by Sin--voicelessness, suffering and oppression. Christ the Redeemer enables people of all nationalities to know and struggle against Sin and its agents on earth. The Kingdom of God ensures that silenced people have hope of Christ's outstanding future, thereby providing them with the infinite courage to set their own realities against Sin and Empire.

The purpose of this essay is to construct a new Chinese liberation Christology in response to silenced people's collective struggle against Sin and Empire. For this purpose, this paper will analyze how each act of Empire and its militarism perpetuates Sin against silenced peoples and nations, induces changes in the psyche of the oppressed, and the social, economic, and political structures surrounding them, and ultimately leads the world into despair. Christ's Kingdom unites divine salvation and human liberation. Jesus's life and ministry reveal the way of the Coming Kingdom of God, recognized as the interconnectedness of true humanity. The Christian calls the silenced people to recognize God's Kingdom as their existential ground and embrace it in hope. It calls them to endure the suffering that comes with practicing love and justice rooted in true humanity, while simultaneously rebelling against twenty-first century Sin and Empire.

Mapping Out Chinese Liberation Theology

Many postcolonial scholars and theologians have identified that the power of imperialism not only consists of physical violence against the colonized but also affects their collective psyche or autonomous personhood. The traumatic past of British colonialism forces the oppressed to view themselves from the perspective that derives from their own cultural experience as well as from the world con-

structed by the colonizers. The colonized might be tempted to relieve the pain from colonialism through a narrative of ultimate cure which gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating their endless desire to return to 'lost origins,' or the New Jerusalem.¹ However, our Chinese Christian identity is not what to be found in an untouched, bejeweled golden city of the past. We, Chinese Christians, have no interest in searching for a fixed cultural uniqueness in the ruins of the constantly deformed and reformed history of China. At the same time, our identity is far from the mere restoration of the hegemonic foster-mother church built by Western missionaries but belongs to the historical imagination and the culture of Chinese people.

Any examination of Chinese theology begs the important question, *how can Chinese culture act as a biblical source of theology?* In "*Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*," Hong Kong Chinese feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan argues that Chinese woman can enter dialogue with the cultures and religious traditions of the first-century biblical world:

The Chinese characters commonly translated as dialogue mean talking with each other. Such talking implies mutuality, active listening what one's partner has to say. Asian Christians are heirs to both the biblical story and to our story as Asian people, and we concerned to bring two into dialogue with one another.²

Chinese language is an organically hermeneutical tool that we, Chinese, develop at a young age. In this dialectical dance with the transcendent in spirit, Chinese language gives us the stage for working through experiences, sorting through memories and imaginations, reflecting, and sense-making. The process of dialectical meditation with the scripture through Chinese language introduces Chinese to the God of liberation. The God of liberation listens to and liberates the voice of the people, and affirms Chinese Christians as the people of God. Here, the people's voices tell the stories of their lives. Their voices are the vehicles for their stories of hope and liberation expressed in many forms: prayers, laments, songs, protests, stories, arts, poems, and dances. People's voices are their tools to recollect and reimagine the past. In doing so, they resist the stifling silence imposed by Empire.

The voices of people are the testimonies of the reign of God. All expressions and understandings of life stand in a sphere of community and are understood only within the context of the community. Taiwanese theologian C. S. Song iden-

1 Stuart Hall. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, eds. Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur (London: Blackwell, 2003), 235.

2 Pui-lan Kwok, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock Pub., 2003), 12-13.

tifies that the story of Jesus is the story of the reign of God.³ The reign of God discloses both the liberating nature of God's movement throughout history and the culmination of that nature in the ministry of Christ Jesus, his death and resurrection.⁴ Instead of citing specific promises and fulfillments for the nation of Israel, Song proposes "the reign of God," consisting of stories, to be the hermeneutical key that connects all three sources that are essential to Chinese theology: stories in the Old Testament, stories about Jesus, and Chinese stories.⁵

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead proclaimed the coming Kingdom of God as the ground of hope for Chinese people. The Hebrew Scripture's history of promise, the story of Christ's salvation, and Chinese people's stories of struggle for healing and liberation from Empire all share common context: the imminent arrival of the Christ. However, the traditional metaphors like "the reign" and "the kingdom" are patriarchal and imperialistic in essence and intended to describe Jesus's future lordship as an alternative to the earthly reign of Caesar. These outdated metaphors fail to move away from the consciousness created by Empire, which imposes structures of violence and domination on the imaginations of Christ's future, and thus, immediately corrupts its radical newness.

An alternative discourse, first coined by Latina feminist theologians such as Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, rejects the sexist connotations of kingdom, and proposes the term "Kin-dom" as an alternative that "includes a sense of community and shared responsibility for survival and welfare."⁶ For Chinese people, kinship is a special bond of creation that fosters harmony, justice, and communal interdependence. Kinship transcends all differences and all limitations of human condition beyond life and death and past and future. In Chinese cosmic imagination, kinship is not strictly defined by blood. Rather it is considered the universal bond between fellow creations. The Chinese kinship system stretches both horizontally and vertically: our family horizontally collects all relationships within human communities, and bonds the fate of individual survival with the collective survival of the household of God, including all living beings. Our blood vertically connects the spirits of the ancestors and those who are not born yet.

Chinese people believe that the coming kin-dom of God consists of stories about people's struggle for the universal kinship of Christ on earth. The heavenly sovereignty of the Resurrected Christ is not a holy empire sustained by a hierar-

3 Chao-Seng Song, "Five Stages toward Christian Theology in the Multicultural World," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, eds. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 10.

4 *Ibid.*, 10-11.

5 *Ibid.*, 12.

6 Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Defining Our 'Proyecto Historico': 'Mujerista' Strategies for Liberation," *Journals of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9, no.1 (1993): 17-28.

chical “kingship.” Through the crucifixion and humiliation of God on the cross, as the victim of Sin and Empire, the crucified Christ draws all creations into the sphere of his heavenly, universal kinship of love, justice and forgiveness. The kin-dom of God does not set boundaries around itself but seeks to break the barriers that separate the world around it.⁷ The risen Christ leads all the creations into the eschatological future for the world, the Kin-dom of God, in which they are called to be kin with one another.

The promise of God’s kin-dom stands at the center of salvation. Christ’s kin-dom of justice, love, and forgiveness can be realized with tender human relationships that reflect the divine-human relationship at the moment of God’s creation of the world. In the eminence of the kin-dom, the risen Christ’s outstanding future provides humankind with an eschatological perspective to view history and their own existence.⁸ Awareness of the eschatological hope rooted in the unfolding of revelation empowers Chinese people to disown the status quo of systematic oppression created by Empire.

Aware of rich theological and cultural sources for Chinese liberation theology, this essay uses a feminist methodology, known as “quilt-making,” explained by Kwon Pui-Lan that “the quilt-maker carefully stitches material fragments and pieces into an overall design that gives meaning to the individual scraps of material.”⁹ According to Kwok, Chinese women’s articulation of their experiences of Chinese and Western imperialism have often been ignored in the academic and cultural establishment because they are expressed in more embodied forms: poems, dances, quilting, etc.¹⁰ Kwok proposes an organic “quilt-making” methodology, as a healing process for Chinese Christian women to recollect their fragmented memories, in resistance to institutionally sanctioned forgetfulness imposed by imperial forces.¹¹

Quilt-making is not a silent mechanical process for these women. Chinese women in the quilt-making circles negotiate for their design by sharing stories about pieces of their past and present, what they know about the world, and what God means to their lives. Their testimonies complicate the past, present, and future, for they insist that slaves and servants exist in the same time and space with masters and the emperor. Through doing multiple exegeses, Chinese women link seemingly fragmented stories about their past and present with other stories of God and the world: stories of creation, of Israelites stories of Jesus, and from the

7 Song, “Five Stages toward Christian Theology in the Multicultural World,” 10-11.

8 Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993), 153.

9 Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial imagination and feminist theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 32.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 30-32.

rest of the world. The methodology of quilt-making allows different stories to be told through a communal prospect -- as God's dealings with humanity. The quilt-making process opens space for the silenced Chinese sisters and brothers to regain their voices through weaving their culture, experience, and existence into the diverse realities of God's children around the world, as well as the biblical reality revealed in Christ.

Rethinking "Sin": Human Relations and Brokenheartedness

The doctrine of Sin is crucial to the Christian faith in understanding the source of human suffering. However, the doctrine has been abusively privatized by Western theology which follows Augustine in identifying "the mystery of lawlessness."¹² The state of sinfulness is understood to be determined prior to any specific social conditions and human relations. In this context, when naming "sins" accompanies the myth of the fall of Adam and Eve, the biblical myth authorizes a divine father figure to curse human existence. Thus, sin is justified through the misuse of divine incarnation for human salvation but becomes the source of guilt and blame for the oppressed.¹³

Rita Nakashima Brock develops a feminist critique of Western understandings of sin as one crucial dimension of her constructive Christology. Brock shifts the conversation away from the doctrine of original sin and male theologians' qualitative judgement on human nature to a womanist understanding of sin as the sign of our "brokenheartedness":

I am suggesting that sinfulness is... a symptom of the unavoidably relational nature of human existence through which we come to be damaged and damage others. Sin emerges because our relationships have the capacity to destroy us and we participate in destruction when we seek to destroy ourselves or others. Hence, sin is a sign of our brokenheartedness, of how damaged we are... Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed.¹⁴

Brock's interpretation positions sin within the concretely relational context apropos human damage and brokenheartedness in order to enhance human responsibility and healing instead of putting the oppressed through blame and guilt.¹⁵ If one speaks of "sin," one should be conscious that sin is not about disobedience to law or God, which renders an act sinful, but about the expression of our

12 Augustine, *Confession*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), vii; p. 11.

13 Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: a Christology of Erotic Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 9.

14 *Ibid.*, 7.

15 *Ibid.*

brokenheartedness and estrangement from the right relationship with God. The state of human relational existence is the state of brokenheartedness. Similarly, Chinese culture emphasizes the radical interconnectedness between individuals and the relational nature of humanity. We believe that all creations are relational, sharing the same universe. We do not extend our love to others, because we do not categorize the universe into two different spheres of existence. Throughout the process of socialization, humans occupy in hierarchical relationships. These relationships are inevitably damaged and traumatized or broken. Thus, brokenheartedness leads to sin—the broken relationships with God and our surroundings.

Brokenheartedness is both the necessary condition for and the consequence of sin at an individual level. Nevertheless, “brokenheartedness” cannot replace “sin.” “Sin” refers to free acts that can generate or reinforce the structures of oppression, including but not limited to patriarchy, capitalism, and racism which pervert human relationships and communal solidarity into exploitation. Sin indicates what is not implied in “brokenheartedness”: namely, the human agency to turn away from the Kin-dom of God. Sin expresses against the character of brokenheartedness that emphasizes human potentials and responsibilities in opposition to the nihilistic despair in accepting brokenness of hearts and bodies as the universal destiny of humanity.

Evil, Empire, and the “China Dream”: Critical Reflection on Chinese Imperialism

Sin and Evil stand against the practices of love and affirmation of faith. Sin emerges in various forms in order to keep us under the existential brokenness and structural oppressions of evil. I follow Carter Heyward in identifying “Evil” as “the vast, global character of structures of domination, subjugation [and destruction] that permeate the foundations of our life together.”¹⁶ Sin is both the root of evil and evil itself. In other words, Evil is the systematic manifestation of relational Sin on a global scale, in terms of hegemonic social dynamics, culture, and economic relations. Sin inherently draws near Evil and serves the purpose of Evil to trigger the deprivation of others. It ultimately becomes an element of collective destruction as the eradication of human relations and communities that signify augmented Sin as the result of Sin.

Empire is the *cumulative causation* of Sin, the prototype of Sin, and the champion of Evil on earth. Empire is historically and socially produced through a process similar to what Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal named as *cumula-*

¹⁶ Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 91.

tive causation.¹⁷ Empire is the stratified structure of oppression, centralized by the common pursuit of supremacy and functions to spread Sin and ultimately, total destruction. As the causation of Sin is cumulative, Empire emerges in where each act of Sin infects and perverts the relational dynamics, social contexts, and economic and institutional structures. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri insist that the concept of Empire is characterized by “a lack of boundaries: Empire’s rule has no limit.”¹⁸ Empire’s boundlessness is forged by the concentrating power in both system and hierarchy through the centralized production of norms and “far-reaching production of legitimacy, spread out over world space.”¹⁹ Empire transgresses the trust of human relationships and the integrity of human communities in perpetual motions of exploitation, destruction, and war.

Therefore, if Chinese theologians were obsessed only with the critique of the West and its global transgressions, their theological discourse would be short-sighted and reinforce the historical amnesia of China’s own imperial Sin. After more than a century of Western imperial invasions and genocides perpetrated by Imperial Japan, the Chinese Communist Revolution reunified most of mainland China’s territories in the Second Chinese Civil War in advocating Mao’s socialist vision of “deimperialization.” If one followed the Communist Party of China’s official narrative in understanding the Chinese socialist revolution as the class struggle and resistance to Western imperialism marred with capitalist expansionism in Asia, this critical moment in Chinese decolonization would glorify the birth of the socialist Empire in the twentieth century. Let us turn to the critical analysis of the Chinese Empire and China’s imperialist desire wrapped by the rhetoric of China dream.

To examine the People’s Republic of China as a rising Empire, it is helpful to scrutinize Chinese exceptionalism. Chinese exceptionalism begins with the belief that China is a unique nation that transcends its borders. Modern Chinese exceptionalism has been developed along the lines of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thoughts. In the 1950s, newly independent countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America stood up against their colonial past and struggled for full independence over former European empires and the U.S. The center of Chinese foreign policy was based on triumphalist myths of national liberation that promotes the vision of the Chinese communist state as the center of and a wondrous exception in the

17 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), Introduction, 1- 7.

18 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), xiv.

19 *Ibid.*,13.

“world revolution” against Western imperialism and capitalism.²⁰ This nature of Chinese foreign policy culminated at the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia which sought to unite Third World nations under the socialist cause with a new Sino-centric imperial structure of trade and international aid. Starting with Mao Tze-tung’s speech at Moscow in 1957, the foreign policy paradigm of Chinese exceptionalism arose by presenting China as the leader-liberator of the colonized Third World. Despite the short lived third-worldist decolonization era, the essence of Chinese exceptionalism have been ingrained into the rulebooks of Chinese foreign policy since then.

Over the last three decades, precipitously after China uplifted major barriers to the global market economy, the world has witnessed the materializing of the old Sino-centric rule with a new socialist logic back to the center of East Asia and even the center of global power.²¹ In 2014, the current Chinese President Xi Jinping concluded his address to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) with the metanarrative of ‘China dream’: “the Chinese people, in their pursuit of Chinese dream of great national rejuvenation, stand ready to support and help other peoples in Asia to realize their own great dreams. Let us work together for realizing the Asian dream.”²² In this speech, Xi specifically links international diplomacy with his official slogan, ‘realizing the China dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’ (中华民族伟大复兴)! Not only does Xi represent a refined version of Chinese exceptionalism that defines China’s ‘peaceful rise’ to be a model for the rest of the world; but also did he express Pax Sinica (Chinese peace)—often glazed by Confucian pacifism—as the foundation for building the ‘China-ASEAN community of shared destiny.’²³ The meaning of the phrase ‘community of shared destiny’ is deeply rooted in the imagination of nationalism. In other words, Xi invokes a harmonious and benevolent socialist empire, seeking to construct a new form of sovereignty in a dawning Sino-centric regional order.

The narratives of Chinese exceptionalism obfuscate the militarism that has been an integral component of Chinese Empire building, as we see in the invasion of independent Tibet. The occupation of Tibet that led the exile of the 14th Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration happened through the violence of colonialism, although the People’s Liberation Army claimed to bring modern civilization to Tibet and liberate all Tibetans from the enslavement of the

20 William Callahan, “China’s ‘Asia Dream’: The Belt Road Initiative and the New Regional Order,” *Asia Journal of Comparative Politics* 1, no. 3 (2016): 230.

21 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

22 Jinping Xi, *On the Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 325.

23 Ibid.

“barbaric” Tibetan aristocrats and monks. The military campaigns of China which annexed Tibet would be later justified by the Seventeen Point Agreement of 1951 or the ‘peaceful liberation of Tibet.’²⁴ Indeed, much of the same language and metaphors such as “liberation (解放),” “unify by force (武),” and references to disputed territories as “indivisible parts of People’s Republic of China’s sovereign territory” are still highly circulated among the state, mainland scholars, and the general public. These rhetoric is also to purposefully justify the potential war against Taiwan’s ongoing independence movement and Hong Kong’s democratic Umbrella movement.

Empire justifies its supremacy through militarism by actively reproducing itself through forced silence of the oppressed and by transforming their suffering and brokenheartedness into the new structures of destruction. This is found in what Taiwanese scholar Kuan-Hsing Chen articulates “imperialist desire”: “the imperialist expansionist mentality justifies exploitation of all kinds.”²⁵ There is a direct connection between China’s imperial desire and the aggregation of Chinese military power in South China Sea and North Africa with the continuation of the fundamental logic of Mao Tze-tung but under the new populist, neo-Maoist rhetoric of “China dream”—Make China Great Again!

By advancing the Pax Sinica ideology that glorifies the state’s war as a means of “liberation,” militarism has been normalized in the mainland China. The culture of militarism now molds Chinese people’s consciousness. China’s 2015 Defense White Paper reemphasizes the Maoist militarist logic of “combining peacetime footing with wartime footing (平战合一),” signaling a wave of military expenditure and comprehensive domestic civil-military integration.²⁶ The danger of militarism is creating numbness among people to their own brokenheartedness, keeping them silent or unaware of their own Sin against others.

Here “silence” refers to both a failure to recognize the radical interconnectedness of all living beings in Christ and an inability to reject the sinful ways of Empire and to imagine an alternative future free from Sin’s evil grips. Imperial China considers any words to disturb or even question the state martial order as the betrayal or the legal (moral) offense against the Empire. The terms like “anti-revolution” and “anti-China” are used synonymously with the crime of treason to describe those who do not subscribe to the narrative of communist utopia. The Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 4th, 1989 was a grave reminder for not only democratic activists

24 Melvyn C. Goldstein, Dawei Sherap, and William R. Siebenschuh. *A Tibetan revolutionary: the political life and times of Bapa Phuintso Wangye*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 1-4.

25 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 19.

26 The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy* (Beijing, 2015). Accessed March 22, 2018: <https://jamestown.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/China%E2%80%99s-Military-Strategy-2015.pdf>.

and young students, but for all the stifled people of China that Empire has not left and their strategy of silence has not disappeared.²⁷ Hundreds of protesters were killed by People's Liberation Army that night, and many student protest leaders are still in exile. Militarism enables Empire to proclaim that no history can question the current reality and that no future can deliver the message of hope. When the past is erased, and the future is unthinkable, the present of Empire is eternal in its projection, unaccommodating in fulfilling its commands.²⁸ The silenced people are removed from history, as if they were dead and corrupted. People of China are still living in such extreme silence, despair, and hopelessness because mere expression of their own voice can claim their lives.

Jesus, The Way: An Alternative to Empire in Chinese Context

Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation against the Evil of Sin and Empire. Entering the twenty-first century, resisting imperialism cannot merely the gestures of resisting foreign influences. While the Chinese Church's independence is emphasized in "Three-self" principles, "self-governance, self-support, self-propagation (自治, 自 理, 自 力)," the Chinese Church was brought at the state's heels through the Cultural Revolution and christened to be the "Three-self Patriotic Church." Our shared collective brokenness should not divert us (Chinese Christians) from reflecting on the extensive Sino-centric military, political, economic and cultural strains that the rising socialist Empire has pressured onto us, our own brothers, sisters, and neighbors in Asia. For Chinese Christians today in the mainland and in the diaspora, the question of who Jesus is becomes critical to our understanding of the Christian message.

In Chinese culture, God is *Tao* (道), the Way. The concept of Tao can be received and transformed by Chinese Christianity. Lao Tzu says: "There is something evolved from chaos, which existed before the Creation of Heaven and Earth. It is inaudible and invisible; it remains eternal and immutable; it pervades and never ceases. It may be conceived as the Mother of heaven and earth. I do not know its name, and call it *Tao*."²⁹ Chinese people came to know the Way through Creation as the free Mother who creates in reflection of Godself: "From the Tao there comes One; from One comes Two; from Two comes Three; from Three come all things."³⁰ The Tao is the unending flow of Creation--innately alive, and evolving endlessly. It is the creative source of all lives, and the dynamic and ever-unfolding ground of

27 George Black and Robin Munro, *Black hands of Beijing: lives of defiance in China's democracy movement*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), 216-220.

28 Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination: Revised Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 42.

29 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), Chapter 25.

30 *Ibid.*, Chapter 42.

all existences. Chinese understanding of the Way that brings all things into being serves to distinguish divinity and humanity by affirming the difference between the roles of creator and creature.³¹ The Way transcends the reality not by ascending to an ethereal realm of fantasies, but by evolving forward in the world and with the world. Chinese theology further accentuates the freedom of the Tao in the relational nature of divinity that the *Tao* does not seek a separate reality of God's own, exterior or independent from the Household of God.

The power of *Tao* is *Yi* (change)-- newness that expressed in creation, transformation, and reconciliation which is situated by the reciprocity of the active principle of *Yang* (☰) and the passive principle of *Yin* (☷). The interdependence of *Yang* and *Yin* is revealed through the relational nature of all existence: heaven and earth, sun and moon, male and female, and past and future. The interplay of *Tao's* relational power penetrates everything under the Heaven, and calls all beings to seeking reunion and reconciliation in *Tao*. The limitations of human relational existence lead us to brokenheartedness. Thus, Sin rises to distort human imaginations about the unifying power of *Tao* into binary oppositions which induce imbalances and conflicts to consolidate Evil's hotbed in the structures of oppression and hierarchies.

The universal principle of divine revelation is, in its intrinsic creative character, bringing the Great Harmony -- absolute alliance between *Tao* and the world in Jesus Christ, the Way. For God so loved the world, that what Lao Tzu described as the transcendent truth of *Tao* -- "the Equable," "the Inaudible," and "the Subtle"-- becomes concrete flesh.³² When Chinese Christians say *Tao* has become flesh, we are not speaking of depleted divinity in an earthly vessel, rather we are speaking of a divine being which has moved heaven and earth to become One with God's own children. The *Tao* points to the infinite divine possibilities of the ultimate truth. Yet, Chinese theologians have to agree that the only thing *Tao* cannot do is to cease to be God. If Christ is expected as the Way, then Jesus is not expected as a divergent reality from *Tao* and the world, but as the One, who reconciles the Household of God to God in God.

In Jesus, the divine movement of *Tao* becomes historical. He tastes the bitterness of human despair, suffering, uncertainty and Sin. The relational nature of the *Tao* forces us to affirm that no one can grasp the Way in Christ today detached from Jesus of Nazareth in the first century Roman Judea. The historical Jesus is the

31 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (New York: Orbis books, 2015), 147. While Douglas's writing does not explain the nature of *Tao*, her writing references the Great High God of West African cultures, whose establishes similar interdependent yet remote relationship with the realm of creatures, in order to care for the creation and maintain the integrities of each other.

32 John 1:14 NRSV.

prerequisite for knowledge of living *Tao* in the resurrected “Emmanuel” -- the *Tao* becomes Kin with us. It indicates Jesus’ humanity in history as the threshold of all Christological inquiry. As the scribes of Matthew’s community, Jesus was a particular Kin to the suffering of Roman Judaea who came to liberate the oppressed from the grips of Sin and Empire. The particularity of Jesus’ Jewishness correlates the Way in him with the narratives of the Exodus event of divine revelation and human liberation. Exodus illustrates that the Way chose to liberate people from estrangement that brought conflict to what God intended the world to be—just household of all that heals and energizes all to become One with the Way. In this regard, Jesus is the embodied movement of the Way that is expressed as a creative and liberating force. The life and ministry of the historical Jesus affirms the revelatory social context of Christology and thereby ratifies the gravity of Jesus’ identification with the oppressed, the marginalized, the exhausted: “The movement of the Tao, by contraries proceeds; And weakness marks the course, of Tao’s mighty deeds.”³³

Unfortunately, today’s Chinese Protestant Church is still lingering within the sphere of missionary Christianity in which Trinitarian formulation of God as the father may have the metamorphic significance that fortifies patriarchal imposition of power as domination. When the patriarchal theological establishment talks about God, their universe is dominated by a supreme being that justifies and enables the functions of Empire and the principles of the communist party. Christ’s salvation is, therefore, overshadowed by a divine father figure and forced to affirm the evangelical or even divine commitment to preserving political hierarchy and continual deprivation of voice and power in China.

Yet, Jesus did not have to die. The brokenheartedness expressed at the event of Crucifixion is not a page from God’s scripted drama. Rather, Jesus of Nazareth’s ambiguous political death on the cross is a testimony to the violence of Empire and the striking human capacity for Evil. At death, Jesus suffered the cruelest penalty that the tyrannical powers, driven by Sin, can inflict.³⁴ The Roman cross was designated for the charge of treason under imperial law to sustain the dominance of Empire. The cross is a public display of Empire’s refusal to relax its Evil grip on the silenced people and its rejection of denouncing mortal supremacy in front of the Crucified God.

Christ did not rule the human realm with an iron fist. Instead, the Nazarene carpenter’s life and ministry ultimately ends in Golgotha with two other deemed criminals. The passion of Jesus revealed the energy of Yin or the power of the powerless. The Way cannot save Jesus alone by abandoning the rest. The crucified God

33 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 40.

34 Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, 93.

shattered any delusions of power and authority associated with the triumphant coming of the Messianic Way that depends on human existential brokenheartedness and all assumptions imaginable resting on the basis of such limitation. Through the harmony of divinity and humanity in the Crucified Christ, the self-giving Way draws all aspects of the fractured human condition into the divine movement for restoration and reconciliation; and the humanity of Christ gathers into oneself all the imperial violence of estrangement and devastation active in the silent destructions of many, and finally his own.³⁵ Including all the powers and drives that serve the purpose to divide, isolate, and oppress beings are all amassed in front of the Cross. The dying and deathless Crucified God invites the crucified and the silenced to risk their existence into Christ's own fate of exhaustion, crucifixion, death, and foretold reality of resurrection. The Crucified God has shown us the Way that all in all reunify through the Kinship of Christ on the cross, and in Jesus' persons and ministry all creations rejoice the fullness of life. The Cross of Christ thus redeems the worthiness of God's creation according to the faithfulness of the Way and the recursive relationship of God and humanity.

The resurrection is the Way's creative response to the silencing powers of Sin. The Yang that attempts to engulf Jesus and the silenced people is actually received by the Way on the Cross. The Roman cross symbolizes the imperial powers that besmirch human relations, ravage human dignities, and marginalize the voices of the oppressed in the relational universe. As death on the cross is annulled, so is the exceptional being that exercises boundless sovereignty in taking death hostage, thereby determining the boundaries of life.

Chinese people as biblical witnesses are called to attest to a historic forward-moving covenant of salvation in the Crucified God. The Way did not simply remove the destructive consequences of brokenness; but receive them into the divine life by participating in and transforming them for those who strive in the suffering. The divine movement of liberation and reconciliation is coming. As the Crucified One and the Coming One, Jesus draws the world into the sphere of Christ's coming Kinship. The Risen One guarantees us the divine prospect of everlasting life, of liberation and healing: "The partial becomes complete; the crooked, straight; the empty, full; the worn out, new."³⁶ With this commitment for justice, the Redeemer ceaselessly cast doubt on the totality of the prevailing orders and realities—not for the sake of future negates the present circumstances but by the virtue of hope springs from the dwelling of Yi (change), it is not yet what it will be in wholeness with the Way.

³⁵ Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 100.

³⁶ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 22.

In conclusion, Jesus' solidarity with the victims of Empire has affirmed to the people of Asia that liberation is synonymous with the enculturation of his message. The coming kinship of Christ the Way cannot be simply anticipated and awaited. Hence "mission" means not merely propagation of faith, but also historic transformation of human existence. Christ the Way reveals that the current reality of Empire has no final say on our lives. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ bring a redemptive understanding of the world: neither self-salvation nor estrangement, but not yet finished in becoming One with the Way in Christ.³⁷ By giving a community orientation to the liberating vocabulary of Chinese culture through communal life and solidarity with its surroundings, the Christian Church matures into a living existential ground in which Jesus is commemorated as "God-become-Kin," who offers healing to the brokenhearted and gathers the silenced people of China around the prospect of Resurrection into a struggling and saving peoplehood.³⁸ Therefore, those who bear the memories about the Coming Kin Jesus can never be desperately devastated about what happens in Beijing, far from the extent that their true humanity is dependent on the narratives of Chinese Manichaeism. To disclose to Chinese people that their struggle against Empire is relevant to the Coming Kingdom of Jesus is the priority of the Christian Church. It forges practices that will ultimately counter the power of the imperial specter of Chinese exceptionalism that haunts the silenced people of history.

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³⁷ Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 180.

³⁸ Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 41.

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Abstract: This essay examines exceptionalism, militarism and the post-colonial empire in the context of Mainland China. It argues that in a society where people have limited freedom of religion, Christology assumes far greater significance. If theology is not compatible with the culture, the church will not grow.

Liberating Christology in the Chinese context thus depends on its ability to enculture successfully with the philosophical outlook linked to the core of Chinese identity. This paper offers renewed understandings of the models of Sin and Empire to critique the power discourse promoted by the dominant consciousness. The final section provides a series of Christological titles derived from Taoist philosophy that challenges the silence of religious groups imposed by the state.