

Zhou Zuoren's "Human Literature" View and Christianity—an Encounter and Departure

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Abstract

Zhou Zuoren's "Human Literature" view which was raised by Zhou before and after "May 4th" Movement, was influenced by Christianity and therefore had a scent of "humanitarian love". Zhou Zuoren was then dazzled by humanitarian love, but there was still a distance between his thought and Christian thought. This article aims at a discussion about the distance in the spirit of Zhou Zuoren's "Human Literature" view and Christian humanitarianism which is represented by Fyodor Dostoevsky, and about the reasons for Zhou's departure from the education of the masses.

Keywords: Human Literature, humanitarianism, Christianity

1. Introduction

Mr. Shu Wu mentioned that when intellectuals adhered to the "May 4th" Movement tradition, they took two paths. "One was represented by Zhou Zuoren, who demanded that they adhere to the "May 4th" Movement tradition completely and spotlessly, insisting on intellectuals' independent consciousness, and resolutely opposed anything that interfered with freedom of thought. One is represented by Lu Xun... who made measured compromise with reality..." (Ha, 2007b, p. 7). Zhou Zuoren began to play the role of a thinker in the "May 4th" period, and he left an indelible mark on the "May 4th" tradition.

In 1918, Zhou Zuoren, then a literature professor at Peking University, published an article titled "Human Literature", followed by the articles "The Literature of the Common People", "The Requirements of New Literature" and "The Ideological Revolution". Hu Shi once said, "Mr. Zhou included all the literary content that our time was to promote in a central concept, which he called 'Human Literature'", and Hu declared that Zhou Zuoren's article "Human Literature" was "one of the most plain and greatest declarations" (Liu, 2009, p. 26). The foundation of this article is "Humanitarianism" and issues related to that topic such as what is human and what is human's life. Zhou Zuoren concluded that "the humanitarian thought in modern literature almost all originated from the spirit of Christianity" (2011a, p. 44) and, "if we want to understand the evangelical literature of love of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, we have to pay attention to the study from this source" (p. 45).

Some scholars in China have discussed Zhou Zuoren and Christian culture. Professor Ha Yingfei of Guangzhou University mentioned the influence of Christianity on Zhou Zuoren's early thought, and she pointed out that Dostoevsky's "broad and profound idea of fraternity" had a far-reaching influence on Zhou Zuoren, and that Zhou Zuoren drew from Dostoevsky's "Nonviolent Thought", the doctrine of "love your enemies" and the spirit of forgiveness and compassion for human sins and mistakes", all of which are a part of the spirit of Christian fraternity, although, she mentioned, "in China because of a lack of Christian background, Dostoevsky's nonviolent thought and 'love' preaching have always been the most difficult thing for the intelligentsia, academia and readers to accept" (Ha, 2006, 2007a). Professor Ha further pointed out particularly the inner tension of Zhou Zuoren's view of Human Literature: "Religion is essentially a culture centered on God, while literature is essentially a culture centered on people, and there is the most fundamental opposition between the two" (2007a). Professor Ha's view has a certain basis, and is consistent with the view of this paper. However, we not only pay attention to the influence of Christian culture on Zhou Zuoren during "May 4th" period, but also further explore how Zhou kept spiritual distance with the Christian spirit, and why he was no longer keen on it in his later period.

This paper will elaborate views in the following aspects. First of all, a basic aspect of Zhou Zuoren's Human Literature is that "literature is human", which was deeply influenced by Dostoevsky, a Christian humanitarian writer. In addition to Dostoevsky's influence, he also admired Japan's New Villageism, which was influenced by the Christian culture of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Secondly, this paper further discusses that the spiritual distance between Zhou Zuoren's humanitarian literary thought and Dostoevsky's Christian humanitarian fraternity lies in their different "view of man". The former held the view that man was evolved from animals, and man could improve himself morally. The latter held the view that man was created by God and man fell, but he is still honorable, and still has a terrible beauty in his soul. Although Zhou's humanitarianism seemed glorious at the beginning, it did not last long. That is because his inner view of human beings was self-contradictory. In addition, after seeing the failure of the utopian experiment of New Villageism, he lost his enthusiasm to uphold humanitarianism.

2. Literature Is Human

Zhou Zuoren had an important statement in "The Requirements of New Literature": "this literature is human, but also personal; it is not ethnic, national, local or familial" (2011a, p. 22). In other words, Human Literature is "literature of human beings". He believed that Human Literature is about mutual understanding and mutual representing. The so-called mutual understanding is that one can sympathize deeply with others. In "Holy Book and Chinese Literature", Zhou Zuoren quoted Wilson Follett to further explain his view: "the beauty of a novel lies in its artistic value which makes it more beautiful than the fact; but more importantly, it is its power to make men recognize the existence of his fellow men by which humanitarianism judges its worth. ..." (2011a, p. 40).

To summarize what Human Literature is, Zhou Zuoren pointed out that literature expresses human beings: "Human Literature, which we call it the literature of life earlier while some people call it the literature of idealism. The name may be different, but the essence is the same. It is literature that affects the happiness of human life by expressing one's feelings in an artistic way as one of human beings" (p. 45). In other words, Zhou Zuoren's requirement for literature is "to be able to recognize the existence of the same kind", "to represent the will of human beings", and "to influence human life".

Zhou Zuoren praised Dostoevsky's novels precisely on the basis that Dostoevsky's works met his literary requirements. Zhou expressed his appreciation for this Christian humanitarian writer whose works were called "the gospel of love" by Zhou in several articles. There is no doubt that Zhou Zuoren valued his humanitarian fraternity which, accorded with Zhou's, "recognizes the existence of the same kind", as one of his literary requirements. The article "The Novel of Dostoevsky" is a translation work by Zhou Zuoren, which he includes in the self-edited collection *Art and Life*. In the article, he put it like this:

"Dostoevsky is talented in showing us the soul of the rags. The lowest and the most shameless people made their sad voices: drunkards slept in the mud crying, and the poor people hid in the dark place speaking. ... Their fallen souls were the same as ours. Like you and me, they love morality and hate evil. They are trapped in the mud, lamenting their unexpected depravity, as we will lament if we also meet unexpected disaster and fall" (pp. 185-186).

Zhou Zuoren particularly appreciated the spirit of depicting the "rag souls". "Russia and China in Literature" was the title of Zhou Zuoren's lecture at Beijing Normal School and Union Medical School in November 1920. "The literature of China and Russia has a common trend, but the spirit of the people that occurs due to a particular national condition is very different", he said (p. 18). He believed that the spirit of the Russian literature could be summed up as a broad and tolerant humanitarian spirit, and that they had developed a "love and compassion for humanity" (p. 79), and that the Russian literature had "found permanent humanity in wet rags" (p. 80). Russian literature is concerned with "humanity" and a developed love despite the harsh condition, which was appreciated by Zhou Zuoren.

During the "May 4th" period, Zhou's appreciation and advocacy of Japan's New Villageism were also related to his emphasis on fraternity. According to Zhou, the last stage of Human Literature is to "cultivate human morality" and "realize human life" (p. 18); and the New Villageism, in Zhou Zuoren's opinion is "the life of humanity" ("the ideal of the New Village, as I simply put it, is the life of humanity") (p. 235). New villageism paid attention to mutual assistance among people, which reflected the ideal relationship of human love that Zhou recommended. Zhou Zuoren once said that the people of the New Village "were greatly influenced by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky of Russia. Musyanokouji, the leader of this faction, admired Tolstoy who 'tills the soil by himself' in his late years, and made the ideal to reality, which is the so-called 'New Village' (Zhou, 2002, p. 446). That is to say, the New Villageism was much influenced by Tolstoy's Christianity" (p. 242). Zhou Zuoren highly praised the action of trying to achieve the ideal relationship of human mutual assistance, and even personally

visited the New Village group in Japan, thinking that the New Village is “a miracle”, and “there will be a total success in the future” (p. 247).

Zhou Zuoren promoted the literary theory Human Literature, insisting on mutual understanding and sympathy between each other, and required a “recognition of the existence of the same kind”, while in real life, he promoted the New Villageism which made the theory into practice, all of which proved Zhou’s dearest dream in the heart during the “May 4th” period.

3. Evolution, Human Morality and “Love for Humanity”

N. Berdyaev believed that the Humanitarianism of Dostoevsky was profound Christian Humanitarianism (2008, p. 21). Zhou Zuoren had a spiritual yearning for this so-called “humanitarianism of fraternity”, but also kept a spiritual distance from it. Dostoevsky’s novels are about fallen human beings, the ones who struggle in the world of sins after being evicted from the Garden of Eden by God. His view of man is in keeping with the Biblical view in the book of Genesis that man has the image of God, but he fell after eating the forbidden fruit. Orthodox Christian theology holds the view that such people have not completely lost the image of God, and that they still have conscience, creativity and reason, etc. (Calvin, 1536, 2010, pp. 205–207). The honor of a person as a human being is reflected in this. The most worthless person, for example Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*, is trapped in a quagmire but he still has conscience that tortures him, and he can feel his daughter’s pain. When he is sober, he faces a complaint of his conscience.

W.B. Trites wrote in the article, “Dostoevsky is talented in showing us the soul of the rags”, and he thinks that the voice of the “rag soul” is “sad but beautiful”, and that “there is terrific beauty in their souls” (Zhou, 2011a, pp. 185–186). The common point of Zhou’s article and this article may lie in the expression “the soul of rags”. In the last paragraph of Human Literature, Zhou expressed similar statement:

For man is always related to mankind, the same as each other, so the sufferings of Peter and John have nothing to do with me, if the sufferings of Zhang San and Li Si have nothing to do with me; likewise, the former two is related to me if the latter two is related to me. Why? It is only because though Zhang San and Li Si or Peter and John have different names, and different origins, they are one of human beings, and all have sensory temperament. What seems pain to him is pain to me. The pain may come upon him as well as it may come upon me. Since the destiny of mankind is one, I must worry about the destiny of mankind as I do about my destiny (p. 9).

However, when we carefully think it over, we find that Zhou Zuoren does not convey the “sadness and the beauty” of the rag souls, only thinking that human beings are related to each other, because “they are one of human beings”, “all have sensory temperament” and “the destiny of mankind is one”, which is a vague, romantic and conceptual description, and does not specifically refer to the hidden “terrific beauty” of “fallen souls”.

Zhou Zuoren understood and appreciated Dostoevsky’s love and sympathy for the “fallen souls” in concept or theory, but there is still a great cognitive distance between them. In Zhou’s view, human beings are not “fallen”, and they have a way to restrain themselves and have lofty moral standard. It can be seen from the article “Human Literature” that Zhou values a “human morality” that is in accord with human feelings if not beyond human capacity. When talking about the ideal life of “human”, Zhou specially mentioned that “in terms of moral life, we should take four items, love, wisdom, faith and courage as the basic ethics, and get rid of all traditional etiquette that is against humanity or beyond human capacity, so that everyone can enjoy a free, real and happy life”. In his opinion, “human morality” has an ideal realm, which can be reconciled with individualism. Although it is impossible to be selfless and be pure altruistic, the “individualism” and “humanity” can be in wonderful harmony.

When Zhou Zuoren raised the banner of “humanitarian love”, his spirit then was high, but soon, he gave up, and after 1922, Zhou Zuoren turned to “his own garden” which later he even abandoned. In 1924, he quoted Herbert Spencer as saying, “the moral lesson is not valid.” “Nearly two thousand years after the religion of love was preached, the religion of hatred is still very powerful; Europe is home to twenty thousand outsiders who pretend to be Christians, and if anyone wants them to follow their own dogma, he will be insulted” (2011b, p. 126). This statement is not specifically related to humanitarian love, but it is still appropriate to apply to that. Since then, Zhou Zuoren has given up on “preaching” to people, and gradually turned away from the idealized humanitarianism. His view of literature has also turned to individualism. After the “May 4th” period, Zhou Zuoren almost no longer mentioned the New Village and the New Villageism.

The reason why Zhou Zuoren stopped preaching warm and loving humanitarianism involves social and cultural reasons, personal life experiences and many other reasons, but if we check the theory itself, we will find that the

chief reason is the internal problems of his theory—the incoherence of the theory. The foundation of his humanitarianism theory is evolution, but the top layer is “humanitarian love”. The two theories (evolution and humanitarianism) are actually contradictory. In the article “Human Literature”, he emphasized that humans were evolved from animals, but at the same time he believed that man is a transcendent being, who is “far from animals” and “can reach a high and peaceful state” (Zhou, 2011a, p. 11). However, from an evolutionary point of view, man was evolved from animals, and there is nothing really beyond animals. At least Darwin and his followers did not provide any proof to show that man is different from animals. It is fair to say that Darwin’s theory of evolution contradicts the dignity of human beings and humanitarian love. According to evolution theory, human nature, which is not fundamentally different from animals, is supposed to lead to competition and adaptation, instead of warm and universal humanitarianism. Since the essence of Zhou’s theory is self-contradictory, it cannot form a system of its own, nor can it last.

Second, Zhou Zuoren’s humanitarian love cannot be long-lasting because he believed that human morality can be improved through intellectual progress. However, the practice of New Villageism has put his theory into an awkward position. In “Human Literature”, he insists that “to be a perfect human being”, which is recommended by him, is the “new gospel of the twentieth century” and he wants to be the one who delivers it (p. 13). In other words, he believed that morality could be transmitted by indoctrination, and that man was not “fallen” or “hopeless”. From his point of view, people are caught in “evil” because of “ignorance”. He says in “The Ideals and Reality of the New Village”, “as the intellectual progress of human beings takes place, on the one hand, mechanical power would be used to increase production; on the other hand, moral thoughts will change, and much of the evil can be reduced.” However, the New Village failed. The New Village in the implementation process met “many personnel disputes” (Liu, 1995, p. 208), and Zhou Zuoren who was always very concerned about the New Village ought to know, and he was disappointed for sure.

In a word, during the “May 4th” period, Zhou Zuoren, when expressing the concept of Human Literature, held the view of humanity as follows: First of all, man had evolved from lower forms of life, and man should pay attention to the individual, while taking human beings into account; man can abide by the moral standards if not beyond human capacity; there can be a harmonious life among the people. The inherent contradiction and idealization of this view of humanity determine that the literary theory guided by humanitarianism cannot last. Dostoevsky held the view of humanitarianism all through his life, but Zhou Zuoren did not adhere to his literary views of “May 4th” period, which is probably because his understanding and the requirements to humanity had inherent irreconcilability.

4. Conclusions

The reason why Zhou Zuoren carried out the humanitarian love in the early stage and attached importance to the New Village doctrine in practice is that he loved this kind of ideal relationship between people. Although the foundation of his idea is the theory of evolution, humanitarian love is erected on the top. He does not really understand and identify with the concept of “fallen man” in Christianity, and he cannot truly love the “fallen man” like Dostoevsky. Perhaps he had been influenced by Dostoevsky and had sympathy with the fallen, but in the end, he chose to keep a distance with Christian idea, for perhaps he was disappointed in true human nature. He chose to believe “teaching is in vain”, because he originally thought that the evil of human nature is caused by ignorance, which can be changed with the enlightenment of intellectual knowledge, and people can be changed by promoting the progress of individuals and society. What he could not accept was that the evil of human nature is innate, and not positively related to knowledge and intelligence. For Zhou Zuoren, Dostoevsky represents the Christian humanitarian love, which only cast a romantic and idealistic color to his theory, because fundamentally, his so-called “love of humanity” is only an extraction of ideas. With no fundamental content and proof, his theory cannot be long-lasting. His entry into “teaching is in vain” is out of historical necessity.

Zhou Zuoren once embraced the Christian spirit, but eventually he became spiritually far away from the latter and finally completely lost sight of the latter. It is only in a certain period of time that he warmly embraced fraternity. He did not really identify with the idea of “fallen people”, but believed that human morality would simply get “better and better”, and therefore when his idealism and romanticism filter disappeared, the evil of human nature was highlighted, and he forever dispelled the enthusiasm for self and human transformation, and turned to “his own garden”, leaving the past “rose-colored dream” (2011c, p. 35) far behind. Zhou Zuoren, as he said in the preface to his collection *Art and Life* in 1926: “As I think of it, the smell of the dreamer and the preacher gradually faded away” (2011a, p. 2).

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