

Article

A New Stream of Spiritual Literature: Bei Cun's *The Baptizing River*

Chloë Starr

Yale University Divinity School, 409 Prospect St., New Haven, CT 06511, USA; chloe.starr@yale.edu

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Abstract: This essay traces the emergence of new categories of “spiritual writing” in Chinese literature, before offering an interpretation of Bei Cun’s 1992 novel *The Baptizing River* (Shixi de he 施洗的河) as an exemplar. Bei Cun’s first novel as a “Christian author” attracted much critical attention, given the contrast with the author’s prior works and its message of spiritual salvation at a time of political change and metaphysical searching. A psychosocial biography of its anti-hero Liu Lang, set in wartime China, the novel charts the protagonist’s criminal livelihood, descent into moral depravity, and gradual questioning of life and purpose. This essay foregrounds the structure of the novel and explores how narrative form and theological meaning interact. To do this, it traces the course of the river journeys that mark the different stages of Liu Lang’s life and which culminate in his unorthodox baptismal rebirth.

Keywords: Chinese Christian literature; spiritual literature (*shenxing xiezu*); baptism; Bei Cun; *Shixi de he*; Shi Wei

1. Introduction

The resurgence of Christianity in China in the Reform era (1978–present) has garnered a great deal of academic attention and coverage in international media, but the revival of a Christian literature or Christian fiction in China has received scant scholarly consideration, especially in English-language research. The production of new writing by contemporary Christian authors and a broader reclamation of Christian tropes or vocabulary in literature followed naturally on from the upsurge in conversions of the post-Mao period. In the time-lag before the study and recognition of this literature by the academy, some authors themselves analyzed and promoted a new category of “spiritual literature,” collating anthologies and publishing journals on the topic.¹

“Spiritual literature” can be seen as both a sub-category of, and an alternative designation to, “Chinese Christian literature,” and its key marker is a concern with an inner life, beyond the material and the interpersonal. Once Chinese-language scholarship began to take note of the phenomenon, various depictions of the new forms of writing emerged. Just as the catch-all term “Chinese Christian literature” provoked debate as to its parameters (does it, for example, include non-Christian authors writing on Christian themes?), analyses of spiritual literature have yet to achieve consensus on form or content. The two major labels of “spiritual literature” *lingxing wenxue* 灵性文学 and “spiritual

¹ See, e.g., Shi Wei’s 施玮 prose and poetry anthologies contained in her edited series *Spiritual Literature Anthology* (*Lingxing wenxue congshu* 灵性文学丛书); the prose collection entitled *Near Shore Far Shore Bi’an ci’an* 此岸彼岸 (Shi 2008) contained entries from 57 authors in China and abroad; or see poet Liu Cheng 刘诚’s articles in the 2000s on the salvation of poetry itself through spiritual writing, or the journal entitled *Shenxing xiezu* 神性写作 edited by poets of the Alliance of Chinese Spiritual Writers.

² See Liu Lixia’s discussion of the “broad” and “narrow” definitions of Chinese Christian literature (Liu 2006).

writing" *shenxing xiezu* 神性写作 are not easily distinguished in English (the former relating to "soul" or spirit and the latter to the "divine").³ While the labels overlap, and much of their content may be subsumed into the broader category of "Christian literature," *lingxing wenxue* has been used of expressly Christian writing, whereas *shenxing xiezu* has been used for a range of religious and metaphysical literature exploring the nature of life and meaning, without a necessarily Christian or theistic perspective. The term *lingxing wenxue* was used as early as 1940 by Lao She as he mused on why China had never produced a Dante, and has been popularized more recently by Christian author and émigré Shi Wei (Wang 2012). *Shenxing xiezu* has become the more widely used term in scholarship, and been applied to the writings of Christian authors like Bei Cun or Shi Wei, to more philosophical works like the non-fiction of Shi Tiesheng, and to other religious fiction, including Buddhist novels (e.g., Zheng and Yuanda 2019).

The core facet of spiritual literature identified by many, the expression of an inner life, or soul, is differently articulated in different genres and oeuvres. He Guangshun suggests that the revival of spiritual poetry in contemporary China is seen in a return to wonderment, and in attention to the relations between humans and their creator, as exemplified in Huang Lihai's poetry collection *Who can run faster than Lightning?* where traces of creation and divine grace are seen in the writing of "small things." Such poems are, for He, "literary witnesses to the highest possibilities of humanity" (He 2018). Novelist and poet Shi Wei also valorizes a literature of the quotidian, arguing that spiritual literature is not found in the mysteries of nature or a renunciation of the world, but in ordinary life, a frown, a smile, in giving readers a pair of spiritual eyes with which to "let people see the beautiful light in the midst of a trivial and dull life; to let them see the image of the divine inside people in the midst of their own twisted, defiled lives; to see the dignity and glory that people had in the beginning" (Shi 2007, preface 3). In one of the most explicitly Christian analyses of spiritual literature (here, *lingxing wenxue*), Shi Wei contends that recourse to the spiritual is not a retreat or flight from life, but a liberation, a call to reflect on life, to listen to the soul behind life calling out (Zhang 2014). Literature lacking the spirit (which, as the ancients knew, is that which animates humans and separates them from other creatures) is for Shi blighted by its predilection for gloom and darkness and its constant recourse to the flesh and the senses, while key tenets of spiritual literature include self-examination, repentance, and dialogue between humans and God (Shi 2007, preface 2, 3). The difference between the two is encapsulated in a shift from "human-centred" to "God-centred" writing.⁴

For critic Yang Jianlong, *lingxing wenxue* is fundamentally concerned with "the salvation of the soul," and marks a new phase in Chinese Christian literature (Yang 2011, p. 20). Yang takes Shi Wei's short story collection *No 100 Xincheng Road* as representative of this category of spiritual writing, and shows how the collection foregrounds the values of love, repentance for sins, and the pursuit of the highest good. The anthology, like the genre more generally in Yang's estimation, focuses on the human spirit, on ultimate questions and on relations between humans and the world. Its main themes are Christian love, especially the cardinal commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself, seen in accounts of self-sacrificial or kenotic self-giving; a Christian sense of sin, explored in stories of people who realize their own wrong and put it right; the overcoming of challenges and dilemmas, possible because humans created in the image of God are endowed with a spiritual faculty; and tales of lives lived in the knowledge of death and judgement (Yang 2011).

A common denominator in discussion of Christian and spiritual literature is its social import, following a long tradition of hailing the moral and nation-building purposes of fiction. Critics frequently link the rise of religious-inspired writing to a perceived lack of "cultural values" in contemporary China (e.g., Wang 2012). Christianity offers a counterpoint, or supplement, to facets seen as lacking or muted in Chinese culture. Undergirding this is often a comparative discussion of "the West" and China, where Christianity is taken to represent a moral ethos, if not identity, derived

³ Yang Jianlong adds a third category of *lingxiu wenxue* 灵修文学, which he translates as "monastic literature" but we might call a literature of spirituality or spiritual growth/formation, written by and for believers (Yang 2011).

⁴ That is, from 人本写作 to 神本写作.

from the modern west. The specific counter-cultural traits ascribed to Christianity vary, but a transcendent focus is foremost. Religious interiority is taken to counter a lack of respect for the spiritual as well as the value of the individual. An engagement with the meaning of life counters the excessive materialism of a consumer era, while grappling with “spiritual questions” confronts a time of “desire and indulgence” (Wang 2012). Although novelist Bei Cun’s early writings as a Christian predate much of the debate and language of “spiritual literature,” his work blazed a trail, providing one of the strongest examples of the (re)turn to the Christian, and in its depictions of alienation, warped desires, and wrestling with the meaning of existence, exemplifies many of the themes critics have seen in the new spiritual literature. Bei Cun’s writing speaks to the critics’ debates on secularity and post-modern values, yet it also contributes an angle rarely discussed in the secondary literature: the theological.

2. The Baptizing River

The Baptizing River (Shixi de he 施洗的河) was written in two months in 1992, not long after the prize-winning young avant-garde author Bei Cun (1965–present) became a Christian.⁵ First published serially in the magazine *Huacheng* in 1993, *The Baptizing River* attracted much critical attention, especially online, not just for the rarity of a Christian novel and the contrast with the author’s prior works and reputation, but also because of its message of spiritual salvation at a time of political change and metaphysical searching.⁶ The novel does not make for a particularly easy or edifying first read, and online critics noted the rather tortuous plot-line as the protagonist sinks from one depravity to the next, escaping death only to encounter some new folly or threat. As one editor noted, in this his first Christian novel, Bei Cun had yet to integrate the essence of his faith seamlessly with his creative art in the manner of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky (Wen 2016, p. 312). Yet the novel touched a raw nerve in society, and the shape of its trajectory and protracted examination of evil has much to say about the human condition.⁷

The Baptizing River is a psychosocial biography of its anti-hero Liu Lang, and follows him from a rural childhood lived in fear of a savage father, to his sexual awakening and self-loathing at university, through the turf-warfare of a business career in illegal commodities, to the apathy of middle age and the mental and physical decline of addiction. This first post-baptism novel of Bei Cun describes a life prior to baptism, and the individual and social sins that make that repentance and baptism necessary. We do not see beyond the first steps of the protagonist’s new life in faith: we see nothing of the complexities of a developing faith journey, or of a Christian’s changed relations with society that inspire Bei Cun’s later novels; the focus here is the social malaise that fails Liu Lang, and the abject failure of his own many vices to bring satisfaction.⁸ Baptism marks an emergence into light, and the confounding of death that meets every other character in the novel.

If literary fiction is writing that gains from a second or third reading, *The Baptizing River* stands the test of multiple immersions. It might be tempting for a critic to skip though a discussion of the protagonist Liu Lang’s degenerate life and move to the “Christian” part at the end of the novel, the coda where Liu Lang struggles onto the riverbank and finds himself in a church community, taken under the wing of an evangelist—but this would be to ignore what Bei Cun is saying about life

⁵ Examples of Bei Cun’s avant-garde writings can be found in English in Wang (1998) and Bei et al. (2010). For discussion of Bei Cun’s conversion and role as public intellectual, see Fällman (2016); on Cultural Christians, intellectuals and Christian publishing, including *Fangzhou* (The Ark), the magazine of Bei Cun’s Beijing church community, see Wielander (2013); for a reading of Bei Cun’s Christian fiction, see Faries (2010).

⁶ Critics such as Wen Neng have argued that it was the “directive spiritual nature” and the fact that the novel coincided with the spiritual illness or spiritual void of the era that led to such a tide of debate; see, e.g., Wen (2016, p. 307).

⁷ As critic Nan Fan noted, this may not be a “good” novel with the finesse of a mature writer, but it is an important one, a work that faces head-on the questions of its era and through which people can discuss the era, Nan (1995, p. 49).

⁸ For a periodization of Bei Cun’s post-conversion writing, and a three-stage movement from concentration on individual sin, to the complexities of a faith journey, to relations with society, see Zhai (2018).

through the structure of the novel. Having spent years constructing abstruse, labyrinthine literary structures in his avant-garde phase, we have to assume the author understands form. Must we suffer through all the abounding torture, the degradation, the putrefying corpses? Bei Cun's theological answer is yes. Liu Lang must reach absolute dissolution before he is finally willing to cede his life to the compunction of an inner voice, and its direction to the free flow of the current, the thalweg that lands him in a Christian community. It is not to paint a portrait of life in war-torn China that Bei Cun chronicles social evils for 250 pages, although the setting of the novel in the late 1930s or 1940s provides a chaotic backdrop and allows for levels of social criticism and introspection that might be problematic in a PRC setting—but to address the question of “why salvation?” and how the subjective “I” reacts to and processes the living of life.

The themes of the novel are important in themselves: backdrop questions over the status of women and gender relations; the city and its underworld; rural poverty and superstition; wartime deprivation; as well as themes relating to the psychology of Liu Lang, including childhood trauma; revenge; sexual addiction and self-hatred; psychosexual development and father-son relations; drug addiction. But these, and their interactions that form the focus of the novel, are all predicated on the tension that the reader knows from the outset, from paratextual features like title, cover illustration and epigraph, as well as hints throughout the narrative, that this is somehow a “Christian” novel, and that something is coming, something we take two hundred anfractuous pages to reach, that will change the meaning of the tale.

The form of narration offers one such teleological irruption. The narrative begins in the third person, and switches to a frame of first-person memoir shortly after Liu Lang's arrival in the city: the novel we are reading is ostensibly the narration of his life, as told ten years later to an evangelist in Du village. The actual framing device lasts only twenty pages, as the novel reverts to the third person for the remainder, but the proleptic interlude signals Liu Lang's future conversion, and sets the novel up as first-person testimony, or witness: a long *mea culpa*, more in Augustinian mode than the customary pre-baptism testimony demanded by contemporary churches. The nature of the story as testimony is underlined by Liu Lang's opening words in this section, “My evil began in the deep waters of the lower reaches,” as he goes on to describe his triad business empire. But even in giving witness, Liu Lang's insistence that “the path I took was entirely due to fate, because I was not someone who wanted to do evil; I always wanted to be a doctor” alerts us to the possibility of an unreliable narrator: the self-delusion that characterizes our protagonist is not effaced in the early stages of conversion (Bei 2016, pp. 56–57). A second “Christian” element early in the novel is also fleeting, but creates a deep imprint. In medical college, Liu Lang admires and desires a young (and rather pious) Christian named Tianru (“heaven-like”), who quotes the psalms at him on every possible occasion, relates all natural phenomena and topics of conversation back to God, and disappears from his grasp as the war progresses. Her insertion into the novel offers the possibility of an alternative life, and the construct of an ideal which holds Liu Lang in its thrall, even as he is unable to respond to her entreaties to believe.

This essay foregrounds the novel's structure, and explores how the work as a whole leads to, and reflects on, baptism. To do this, it follows the course of the river journeys that mark the different stages of Liu Lang's life: childhood and adolescence, adulthood, and baptismal rebirth. Liu Lang's autobiographical testimony is far from the traditional Chinese genre of biography, but the course of Liu Lang's life is not just a prelude to baptism; it is too long, and too tortuous, not to harbour meaning in itself. Liu Lang's rise and fall is traced here through his power plays, relations to women, philosophy of life and recourse to superstition. The recurrent motif of the river, as literal transport and metaphor for journey, as bearer of sin and source of redemption, courses through the novel. The river that runs between the protagonist's hometown and the city where he inherits a business forms the boundary of his known world. It swallows up the young protagonist's brother when Liu Lang pushes him in; it is where he himself falls and is dredged up, clutching his gold, on arrival in the city. The eponymous river eventually guides him to the haven at Du village and performs its baptism as he is thrown into its waters, spitting him out on the bank. Like the Jordan today, the river is “a filthy

place where dead rabbits, waste and industrial effluent floated by the dock" (Bei 2016, p. 56), an absorbent channel for human detritus.

The novel was a form of baptism for Bei Cun himself, as he entered the stream of writing anew as a Christian novelist. The repeated use of "transformation" (转型) by critics to describe Bei Cun's writing after 1992 carries overtones of metanoia, and points to the about-face in life and literature that characterized his conversion, when the meaning, form, shape and purpose of writing changed starkly for him. This novel is the first expression of a re-emergence into a new way of literature: in six months Bei Cun went from an "extreme formalism," from seeking meaning through form (or pointing to the impossibility of coherence in either), to possessing a meaning and wanting to transmit it. As one critic wrote, "Bei Cun is still Bei Cun, Bei Cun has changed" (Nan 1995, p. 50). Literary structure, once symbol of that search for meaning, was now a means to an end, and an ambivalent one at that.⁹ Literature, to which Bei Cun had dedicated his life, now seemed to him more like something Eve encountered in Eden (see Bei 1995, p. 65). On conversion, his relation to literature paradoxically changed from a "holy pursuit" to a means of making a living and a source of vocational anxiety and doubt. According to Bei Cun himself, this stemmed from a reaction to the vision of despair that so many writers of his literary education had offered (from Hemingway or Faulkner to Kafka, Goethe and Camus) and their inability to articulate any way forward, coupled with a growing belief that literature itself could not perform the task. All literature could do, he surmised, was to diagnose the problem a little more accurately. It could not offer a prescription or cure; its utopia was "a fabrication."¹⁰ *The Baptizing River's* epigraph, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near," not only acts as a commentary on the life (and eventual penitence) of its main character, and as a warning to readers, but also as an enigmatic comment on the author's own profession.

Doubts aside, Bei Cun did continue to write, and critics have read his turning-point novel as part of a broader shift in the literary landscape, as the avant-garde movement of the 1980s began to splinter, freighted under the weight and unfulfilled expectations of its formal experimentation.¹¹ In Xie Youshun's explanation, Bei Cun, along with select other writers of his generation like Yu Hua or Ge Fei, chose the path of "spiritual depth," transcending the secular world, as an escape route. Other contemporaries such as Su Tong headed towards new realism, while a third group, including Sun Hanlu and Lu Xin, sought to develop a new independent aesthetic. The emptiness of an excessive attention to "technicalism" was countered by Bei Cun with a very plain surface expression, a type of "spiritual reportage literature" (Xie 2016, p. 317). The notion of a spiritual literature was a challenge to literary critics of the 1990s, and debates over Bei Cun's work opened up questions of the purpose of literature, just as his characters open up for readers' questions on the purpose and meaning of life. The intensity of Bei Cun's desire to evangelise through fiction is evident in the articles and interviews discussing *The Baptizing River* included as appendices to the 2016 edition.

3. Childhood

A growing body of data warns us of the dangers of adverse childhood experiences (Aces), and the links between the toxic stress they cause and poor health outcomes later in life (Felitti et al. 1998; Zanolli 2018). Continuous exposure to domestic abuse, poverty or neglect can cause malfunctioning responses to stress, and resultant elevated cortisol levels are associated with altered brain functioning, immune system and DNA damage. Given that children raised in households with multiple indicators of poverty and violence have higher addiction rates, Bei Cun's portrayal of the life course of his protagonist Liu Lang, from medical student to opium addict, via addictions to sex and to self-sufficiency, has strong scientific ballast. Liu Lang's childhood was, by any standards,

⁹ The novel can be read as metanarrative on authorial conversion; while the degree of change in Bei Cun's life and writing may mirror that of his protagonist, this does not invite an assumption of parallels between the novelist's experiences of life and Liu Lang's, as some have suggested.

¹⁰ Bei (1995). Like his counterparts, Bei Cun had embraced aesthetics and poetry as the way to find meaning, but suicides among friends and in literary circles tested this belief, and contributed to the paradoxical drive to express (new-found) meaning through literature while questioning the possibility of this.

¹¹ See Xie (2016) or Xie (1993).

terrible. Conceived in rape, plied with abortifacients in utero, his early years were punctuated by violence and loneliness. The pathos of a child's eye view as he navigates a countryside populated by ghosts and evil spirits is one of the strengths of the narrative. The acuity of the psychological depiction of characters and their interactions throughout the novel is notable, and chimes with Bei Cun's interest in subjectivity and dreams.

The childhood years of *The Baptizing River* are important because they set not only the scene, but the direction of the protagonist's whole life. This life, together with Liu Lang's musing on it, forms the central plotline, and the subjectivity of life as plot accounts for some of the ponderous pace and seemingly directionless narrative later in the story. The novel takes on the qualities of a Greek tragedy in the first few chapters, with fratricide and attempted patricide, but other grand, mythic themes stem from the family nexus too: generational sordidness and the sins of the father visited on the son; the journey quest to leave a hometown and become a man in the world; ageing parents, and dealing with decay, dementia and their portent of one's own future. The spatial landscape, the rural-urban divide and the setting of war-torn China under Japanese invasion form background themes, but these are subservient to the interior, or psychic landscape of the characters. The two great boat journeys of the novel: Liu Lang's journey to town in his late twenties to follow in his father's footsteps, and the eventual rudderless floating to the riparian Christian haven, frame his adult life, but, suggests, Bei Cun, the traveller is already formed by his early experiences. This privileging of childhood is rare in Chinese literature, and offers a modern and holistic concept of personhood.

In the first three chapters of the novel, we see the protagonist at eight, and then in his twenties at medical school. The eight-year-old boy is taciturn and regarded as "weak" by his family and playground bullies alike, yet is the sole one to venture out on Ghost Festival day when other villagers are hiding indoors. His pale face and slender torso unman him in his father's eyes, and are linked, in his parents' eyes, to his birth (Bei 2016, p. 21). One of the many injustices in Liu Lang's life is the manner in which his conception—in a field, at which his mother was at work spreading manure—is held against him. "If we can fuck a child out in that sort of place stinking to high heaven, he's going to be rotten!" exclaims his father, while his failure to succumb to strenuous attempts to abort him lead his grandmother to exclaim that he seems to be "an evil spirit reincarnated." Liu Lang's father, Liu Chengye, utters the first of many dark premonitions: "if this child is born, my life's at risk" (Bei 2016, pp. 9–10).

Peasant superstitions surround Liu Lang's early life, and he himself is held to have second sight when he predicts a local death. Liu Lang's father is alternately absent and forcefully present in his life, and his returns to the village bring fear to life. The coarseness of Liu Chengye's language is shocking, and its repetition wearisome. When the child is brought in with a gash to his head from a fall, his father's "violent, frenzied expression" floats in front of him: "Crying? Still crying? Cry-dick!... howling at a cut that size—your old man had his chest blown open and didn't make a sound—are you ever going to grow any bollocks?" (Bei 2016, pp. 5–6). Liu Lang's fear of his father is so great that he stops crying, although fresh blood spurts out after his father thumps him. Even as a child, Liu Lang only ever refers to his father as "he" in conversation with his mother.

Liu Chengye's foreboding over his son is fulfilled in the first of many episodes with Oedipal overtones, when Liu Lang, who has been given a Daoist charm to drink following his injury, appears at his father's bedside in the middle of the night, cocked revolver in hand. "Your eyesight's off," is his father's sardonic comment when his gun fires a blank (Bei 2016, p. 13). This incident remains "both clear and confused" in Liu Lang's later memory, but a second attempt twenty years later is perfectly lucid. His father's return to the family home triggers a traumatic response in Liu Lang, and the medical student returns to his father's bedroom at night, "as if possessed"—but cannot pull the trigger. "If you want to live, you have to fire it," offers his father darkly, surprised by his son's new-found facility with a firearm. Liu Chengye's revenge is cold and clinical: he shoots his son's right ear lobe off, and then argues with him over his claim not to have touched a gun: "Liar—you did when you were eight. Now we're even. You can go downstream [to town] now." (Bei 2016, pp. 18–19). The wound remains with Liu Lang throughout his adult life, and displays a visceral effect: when he meets his father by chance, his ear throbs and threatens to split open.

In his final year in his childhood home, waiting for his ear to heal, Liu Lang watches his father's slow senescence. We trace the change-over between father and son, as Liu Lang no longer hides from his father, but his father hides from the light of the son. We see glimpses of the future, as the paranoia that leads Liu Chengye to have a coffin and shroud prepared for himself—because no-one else will—is also reflected in the suspicion that his children will “give his body to the dogs.” (Bei 2016, p. 29). Neither son does, in fact, care about their father's welfare. One night after empathising with his father and trying out his coffin, Liu Lang dreams that he chops his father up with an ax, but discovers that the corpse has his mother's face, with maggots crawling out of the eye sockets. Liu Lang gradually understands his mother to be both victim of his father's violence and complicit in it, but her mutilation severs the thread to his childhood. Woken in the night by a burst of gunfire as troops attack their compound, Liu Lang and his brother hide in their furnace until morning; when they emerge and discover a stray bullet has pierced their mother's breasts. Liu Lang's stomach turns at the thought that the breasts which nurtured him have been shattered by an iron bullet, and “things that had seemed so sacred were so fragile” (Bei 2016, p. 38). The last violent episode in Liu Lang's adolescence reifies the sexualised nature of his childhood suffering and sets up a confused and discontented adulthood.

4. City Vice and the Adult Self

One of the difficulties of sustaining a long narrative with an antisocial and increasingly unstable protagonist is in engaging readers. There is a certain fascination in the criminal underworld that Bei Cun depicts in the central section of the novel, and he does not flinch from its seedy side and violence. The very earthy nature of the stories sets up the conditions for the cleansing of baptism. Liu Lang's adult life is a litany of violations of the Decalogue: theft, adultery, murder, covetousness, unfilial acts. Moments of humour and wry understatement lighten the narrative, while an obstinate hope continually resists the pathos. If the first half of Liu's adult life is an excess of pleasurable vices and competitive skullduggery against his business rival, and the narrative skips along briskly, the second half is a time of introspection, depression and searching for meaning. Turpitude cedes to torpor, and the narrative slows to the pace of a blocked drain, as Liu Lang's mental processes are hampered by depression and opioids. For many Chinese critics, this exposure of a soul, and close-up view of a character's inner development is the centre-piece of the novel, its sense of a “lack of any existential significance” embodying the spiritual crisis of the times. (Xie 1993; Nan 1995).

Liu Lang arrives by boat in Zhangban with his father's parting advice ringing in his ears: “You shouldn't trust anyone, only trust gold and guns...” (Bei 2016, p. 40). The advice is short-lived, as Liu Lang is mugged and robbed of his gold strands at the dock, a baptism into city life that convinces him “he has already entered a different world.” Even the metaphors are bloody: as his first urban day dawns, “the skies were gradually lightening, the colour of the city like the dark red that seeps from a wound.” (Bei 2016, p. 43). Norms are upended here: the violence against women of the rural world extends its reach as Liu Lang's nostrils are forcibly pressed into the ground and he smells the fresh earth, terrified at the sound of a gun clicking. Liu Lang, the aspiring medic who has been forced to give up his career plans and who now sees himself as a “sacrifice,” understands on day one of his new life in the city that death is a physical reality and a metaphysical threat. Money may be the root of evil and the immediate cause of death, but “he knows that each step neared death, and whether you ended up thrown into the river feeding the fish or staring up the barrel of a gun, the result was the same.” (Bei 2016, p. 43).

It does not take long after his initiation for Liu Lang to be infected with the power play and cruelty of his environs, once he has absorbed the shock that his inheritance is effectively an opium business, and that his father was a multiple murderer, some of whose corpses lie rotting in the stone cellar of the premises. Workplace violence in triad feuds inures him to cruelty, which is then played out in domestic abuse. In the first of many revenge incidents that spatter the novel and show the inescapable nature of childhood trauma, Liu Lang plays with his mugger-cum-servant A Jin, cruelly fiddling with a gun, wanting to enact humiliation “like a dog” until the employee can't stand the tension and pleads “just kill me!” Liu Lang shoots off his ear-lobe, an exact toll for his father's damage

to his own ear. The former medical student takes a certain aesthetic pleasure in discovering that “flesh opens like a flower.” (Bei 2016, p. 52).

One of the more disturbing traits as the novel unfolds is Liu Lang’s sudden and sometimes irrational violence, bouts of which were already present as a student, when he smashes a friend’s head against a column “like a Japanese bandit” for an insensitive comment, or pins down and half-throttles a girl whose make-up and clothing bespoke falsity.¹² Later, when Liu Lang rolls over and wretches after intercourse, and the woman, Ruyu, asks him why, his response—that it is his first time—elicits a surprised exclamation of disbelief. Liu erupts in fury at not being believed, and throws her to the ground, pushing her head down so that her teeth are pressed into the mud, and she “emits sorrowful cries of fear, like a hen about to die” (Bei 2016, p. 91). His disproportionate outburst comes just after he has killed for the first time, putting a gratuitous bullet through the head of a hapless girl mistaken for Ruyu. Liu Lang is shocked by his experience of murder, and by the ontological change in someone alive a moment ago who is now suddenly named “corpse,” and he vows not to do so again—but the act of killing gives him a graphically described sexual release nonetheless.

If the change in Liu Lang’s character stretches credibility, the portrayal of domestic violence in the novel is disturbingly credible. Liu Lang’s relations with women are central to the novel, and reveal many of his insecurities as well as self-imposed disconnect with society. This was, the narrator tells us, a time of male domination, when “whipping or insulting women seemed normal occurrences,” and Liu Lang is caught between a father whose view of women is that “when you’re close to them you think they’re all bitches, and it’s no fun—you might as well feel yourself to your heart’s content” and a best friend in medical school whose running commentary as he dissects a female cadaver combines physical and moral violation, sending Liu running out of the room to vomit (Bei 2016, pp. 76, 74, 72). The depiction of women is sometimes more redolent of late imperial courtesan world than the 1940s, but the psychology of relations between the sexes is convincingly described. After Liu Lang has installed himself as boss of the snake triad, he wastes little time in engineering a meeting with Ruyu, the wife of his rival, and seducing her with his gaze and gallantry right under the nose of her husband, Ma Da. Once he has had sex with Ruyu, and she has endangered her life in helping him overcome his virginal impotence, he is searingly honest about his priorities: “I don’t want to marry you. What I want to marry is Ma Da’s wife; my dreams are all about possessing her.” (Bei 2016, p. 93). Insensate to the pain he causes others, as her romantic fantasies are disabused and the reality of her disloyalty looms, Liu’s instrumentalising of women borders on sociopathic.

Before Ruyu appears in the novel, there is a twenty-page flash-back to university days, narrated as Liu Lang’s confession testimony, and recalling the one woman whom he does not regard as an object. The interlude is telling. Liu is captivated by Tianru’s gentle manner, although their worlds of reference are far apart. He does not understand her references to a heavenly father, and points out he does not want to be anyone’s father, and that hardly any sons love their fathers (Bei 2016, p. 58); his warped view of relationships militating against an easy reception of the Christian message (and its “father God” language). While Ruyu and other women in the novel frequently offer a sharp-tongued retort to Liu Lang, Tianru’s repartee as she parries in dialogue shows her an equal partner, and his delight at her brings tears, even as he struggles to accept her claims that the word of God can teach him how to live or his “need to be saved” (Bei 2016, pp. 62, 64). As Liu pines for Tianru, his friend Tang Song introduces him to another girl, whose shapely form induces his first lascivious dreams, and the beginning of a masturbation habit that torments him with shame. Liu Lang is aware of the power of association with Tianru—he feels “as though his heart had been cleansed” after she responds to a touch of his hand and speaks of his need for God—but is also challenged by her. The tension between his carnal desires and his infatuation with Tianru increases as he begins to see himself through her moral compass, and becomes paralyzing when he fears she might have caught sight of him doing his “dirty” act. Liu’s inability to escape his own lusts sickens him, and in a moment of extreme self-loathing Liu prepares to take a surgical knife to himself, in the belief that “one knife

¹² Bei (2016, pp. 67, 70). Nan Fan suggests that in depicting this irrational, sudden evil, Bei Cun is pointing to original sin, the flaring up of the evil of human nature, or instinctual nature itself. Nan (1995, p. 50).

stroke can solve it" (p. 69). Tang finds him with a sanitized knife before any irreversible damage is done.

It does not take long for Liu Lang to tire of the woman he steals as a wife. When Ruyu caresses him, he compares her touch unfavourably to his mother ("you're as different as heaven and earth; you're a bitch, my mother was a woman")—yet wants a wife to mother him and cradle him. (Bei 2016, p. 99). Liu Lang's arrested development would give a Freudian a field day, and his conscious musing that his mother's avoidance of him as an older boy was linked to his longing for her breasts provokes sadness as he recalls her comment that he would need to take a wife—"but I never thought I'd have a different woman lying beside me." Family relationships and well-being are threatened by increasing isolation. Liu's natal family is dispensable: he hesitates to open a letter from home, and when he does read its tale of destitution, he uses the letter as toilet paper. Liu rationalizes his lack of empathy and filial capacity as stemming from villagers thinking him a freak as a child, and his mother choosing to love his father. One of Liu's most egregious acts against kin marks a turning-point in the novel and the beginning of decline. Liu has been told that business rival Ma Da has captured his brother and is about to use him as a human shield in a deal. Having taken a mistress, the girl he once lusted for on campus, Liu is loath to leave her and go to see if Ma Da's threat is real. When he goes out to Du village to weep over his brother in the dead of night, it is too late. As even Ma Da thinks he is terrifying for not freeing his brother, Liu retorts, echoing Cain: "what's a brother?" In a game of rivalry where the most callous is victor, Ma Da concedes: "you're more ruthless than me. You'll win" (Bei 2016, p. 124).

Physical and mental decline progress in tandem over the second half of the novel, beginning with nightmares and lassitude. Liu sleeps cocooned between wife and mistress for safety, replacing them at one point with a stockade of books. Fearing retribution (报应), he withdraws from active leadership in the business, where armaments and wartime industries had added to healthy opium profits. As the racy living of pleasure-seeking pales, and having repelled family and friends, Liu retreats to his own drab inner life. Life and plot run out of options. As Liu's life begins to meander, so does the narrative pace.¹³ Liu becomes photophobic, and paranoid that his food might be poisoned; his fear is somatized in vomiting. Mood swings persist: Liu takes delight in a new dog, then shoots it. He feels trapped by being locked into competition with Ma Da. Lethargy prevents him from working, but when Ruyu takes charge of caring for him, he sees her actions (tidying his clothes, tipping out the chamber pot) as violating his freedom, a freedom that values its own autonomy above all else. The thought of being beholden or dependent, or having to show gratitude is "worse than having a long spear roughly plunged into his belly" (Bei 2016, p. 165). The follies of the father are repeated in every possible way in Liu, as he builds a lavish tomb for himself, aware that no one will mourn his passing. Liu retreats to his anti-earthquake, bullet-proof tomb, taking his valuables with him. Literally self-enclosed, entombed, Liu at his lowest regards his life as completely without significance, lamenting his ageing body and loneliness (Bei 2016, pp. 174–75). The vapid sterility of life confronts him as he pursues "his dream ever since childhood: independent life, with no disturbance." As the narrator reminds any reader who has missed the point, an entirely autarchic life is selfish and cowardly, and requires expelling all kith and kin.

The physical decline of mid-life also engenders a metaphysical turn and consideration of ethics and meaning. A central dilemma of Liu's life is concretised exactly mid-way through the novel in the myth of self-determination. "Our poor protagonist," we are told, "always wants to be master of his own fate, but also thinks everything is already decided by destiny" (Bei 2016, p. 159). The return of his medical-era friend Tang Song provides a lifeline in a benign sparring partner, and their conversations skim across questions of goodness, deontology and religious belief:

People like you, said Liu Lang, will only ever eat coarse grain and wear cotton; in times like this there aren't things which we should or shouldn't do, there's only things you can or can't do. If you're savvy, you get to eat two bowls of rice while someone else starves to death...What I can't

¹³ Xie Youshun makes a similar point in suggesting that the narrative in *Baptising River* follows the "spiritual logic" of the character, Xie (1993, p. 39).

stand most is sitting and discussing morality, the more we talk about it the more guilty I feel...forget it. (Bei 2016, p. 147).

As Tang tries to rescue and retrieve Liu from his self-enclosure and web of doubts, he discovers that their friendship, that cardinal Confucian relationship, is built on a foundation of sand. When Liu Lang mocks Tang for suggesting they are close friends, “he understood for the first time that Liu Lang had never trusted anyone, that his own advice was wholly unreciprocated, and that Liu Lang had kept him by his side for a while merely to dispel his loneliness” (Bei 2016, p. 176). This realization that his trust, and dependence on his companion were mere “soap bubbles” marks a downward turning point for Tang himself. Liu’s response encapsulates the sentiments of many of the “spiritual void” generation (the term translated “believe” could equally be rendered “trust”):

When I was small I believed that there was a creator, then I believed in my parents, and believed in other people, after I grew up I believed in myself, and later discovered that I was unreliable too, and so believed in chance—and see, now I can practice divination, and I calculated that you would come here today and talk a load of rubbish.

Now you only believe in your own doubts, said Tang Song.

It’s the only way, said Liu Lang, absently. To believe in doubt is more reliable than believing in oneself. Look, why should I believe what you say is true? How can I tell you’re not about to shoot me in the back? (Bei 2016, p. 176).

Bei Cun is prescient in pointing to a lack of trust as critical in society, before contaminated food scandals severely damaged consumer confidence in China and long before “belief” or “faith” (信仰) became a key term in Xi Jinping’s rhetoric and a core political value. Tang cannot bear his friend’s “cold, unfeeling” gaze, and the absurd end-point of his position—since without trust, there can be no human relationship—and leaves. Two teardrops fall from Liu, who now sees that he and Ma Da are the two most lonely and timid people in Zhangban.

The man-cave fails to provide solace. In his recovery from this mental breakdown, Liu becomes addicted. In the inward gaze of the second half of the novel, conversations with Tang rehearse snatches of the major themes of twentieth-century life: individual liberty and the totalitarian state, solipsism and socialism, utilitarian vs consequentialist ethics, freedom vs conformity. If Tang is a foil for Liu Lang, it is important for the impending baptism and conversion that the question ‘but what of a good person?’ be pre-empted. In a somewhat clumsy and directive passage, Tang, acknowledges that he is not so different from Liu Lang, that he too is “completely in the dark,” and has no way of extricating himself from the wrong he has done. One night Tang wakes bolt upright to the question: if I were in Liu Lang’s place, would I be like him? His own inner filth troubles him, as does the dissonance between what others see and his inner reality. While people regard Tang as a gentle and good medical teacher, he knows that he has had thoughts of raping young girls, even if he has not acted on them—thoughts that nauseate him and provoke him to gentleness. While others say he is a good person, Tang concludes that “trying to be a good person in this world is just a type of self-deception” (Bei 2016, pp. 190–91). Unable to achieve goodness, and with no Tianru to show him any other way, Tang takes solace in chess, and later *qigong* and *fagong*. The question of human nature recurs periodically. When Liu Lang has temporarily taken Ma Da’s mother hostage to entice him to visit, he wonders “How can such a kind, good woman raise such an evil son?” Liu Lang answers his own question by positing a father like his own as the cause, while the narrator suggests that further thought would give an alternative reading: “human nature is evil” (Bei 2016, p. 214).

Existential fears of middle age lead the two triad bosses Liu and Ma to superstition and divination. As soon as Liu Lang achieved fame, the narrator reflects, “he discovered there was something he couldn’t grasp—the future” (Bei 2016, p. 152). Having believed in his own capability all his life, Liu no longer bases business deals on acumen or intuition, but on divination prognoses. The most poignant, self-defeating episode of Liu Lang’s superstitious turn comes when Ruyu is pregnant. The pregnancy draws together in a dense concentration many of the questions of Liu Lang’s life as he contemplates fatherhood: his relationship with his own father, his relationship with

Ruyu and other women; the notion of family; the nature of fear; his sense of transcendence and religion (“my son is my religion, in the past it was money, guns, women—now it’s the turn of my son,”) he tells Tang (Bei 2016, p. 235). The pregnancy triggers a strange illness in him, an intermittent deafness and piercing tinnitus, followed by visual hallucinations, a sort of prosopagnosia where he fails to recognize even Ruyu. When a fortuneteller refuses to divine, and Liu catches sight of his own pallid countenance in a mirror, he is terrified. “Abort it! Abort it! he roars at Ruyu, don’t give birth!” (Bei 2016, p. 231). Ruyu’s cries indicate her understanding of Liu’s absolute control over her body, and the next month sees a succession of strenuous and bloody, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempts to kill off the foetus.

New depths unfurl as the protagonist spirals downwards. Ravenous and nauseous, the emaciated addict finds relief from a black fog of despair in the floating comfort of a morphine high. Opium offers a “ladder to heaven,” but leaves Liu and Tang unrecognizable, prone to temper flares, extruding copious phlegm, and assaulting maid and servant alike. Opium becomes “absolutely more important than life” to Liu, and he sells his birthright to his business manager. In his opioid fug, Liu can no longer see the reason for enmity with Ma Da, something which “proves he has wasted his life” (Bei 2016, p. 252). When Tang dies, an event notable in its ordinariness, his death stands in for his friend’s; it is the death Liu Lang deserves. In Tang we see the contradiction and fear that accompany an early death: seeming acceptance, followed by denial and resistance. “I’ve never so much as trodden on an ant in my whole life, why should I be punished? I’m a good person, what sin have I committed?” Tang laments, before echoing the bitter cry of Job: “Why wasn’t I allowed to die at birth?...” Like the eponymous protagonist of Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a novella similarly written shortly after conversion, Tang and Liu expend much energy attempting to justify their own goodness to themselves and the universe in the face of death, while their questioning points to doubts over the answer.

5. Rebirth

If traditional Chinese narrative arcs rise to an apex then fall in the second half of a novel, *The Baptising River* appears to trace such a pattern, with Liu Lang’s rise in power and wealth as the head of an (illicit) business empire, and slow fall into ill health and mental decline.¹⁴ As a Christian confession, however, the novel forms more of a U-shape, with a deep nadir in Liu’s layered depravities at the height of his powers, and gradual rise as he questions life and its meaning, even as his health and cognitive powers falter, towards the crescendo of baptism and salvation glory. Baptism marks an act—even if unsought and not fully comprehended—but Bei Cun’s story shows how the whole arc of life has tended to this moment. Liu Lang’s life has been proceeding towards baptism long before he is tipped into the river a final time; baptism for him was indeed “the unfolding story of our entry into the life of God” (Radcliffe 2012, p. 111). Liu Lang’s youthful sins, his cruelty, temper and manipulation of others—relatable as they are to the trauma of his upbringing—have produced their own wreckage in his life in its loneliness and broken relations, while the more metaphysical sins of his later years, his extreme self-sufficiency and his determined self-justification, have led to the questioning of life that is a prerequisite for his conversion. The eventual acceptance of brokenness and dependency which propels Liu to leave the city may be God-given, yet God has, as Nan Fan notes, been present throughout, enabling Liu in the second half of life to understand that “he can never extricate himself from the swamp of his sins,” a point Liu Lang himself comprehends when his spiritual eyes are opened (Nan 1995, p. 55; Bei 2016, p. 295).

Baptism “admits the reality of sin,” (Williams 2018, p. 136) and the construct of the novel implies that this confession is both individual and corporate. The long central section of *The Baptizing River* that portrays the sins and brokenness of Liu Lang is also an indictment of society: its greed, violence (including gendered and domestic violence) and addictive behaviours, as well as its superstitions and abuse of the vulnerable. Society itself needs cleansing, needs to admit the reality of sin, the novel

¹⁴ C.f. Plaks (1987). Liu Lang is not eliminated prior to the conclusion, however, as central figures frequently were.

suggests. Liu Lang needs saving from deformed human life, from generational mis-nurture and the sins of his fathers as well as sins conditioned by the social chaos of war. Baptism is a means of salvation from the troubles of life as well as troubles for the individual, which inserts the novel into the broad channel of *jiuguo* (救国, saving the nation) discourse that was so pressing for the first generations of Chinese Protestants. This is not, however, a nationalistic soteriology, and before he professes his faith Liu Lang is roundly chastised for putting forward a theodicy argument with a nationalistic bent:

He suddenly posed a question: can he [Jesus] really save me?

He can. He knows people, and knows that they are seemingly respectable but their mind is teeming with worms and full of filth. Only he can save you.

Then why doesn't he save the Chinese who are being killed by the Japanese? Why is he so cruel and unfeeling? If you get God to apologize to me for this, I'll believe in him. (Bei 2016, p. 215).

While the nation is at war and imperilled in the novel, the lack of attention paid to wider social issues by the main characters is almost shocking; opium-addled brains and self-centred preoccupations render this intelligible within the storyline, while theologically the absence points to the perceived need for individual conversion prior to social salvation.

When Liu Lang hears a voice telling him to go by boat to Du village, he responds to the call, using the last of his money to purchase a boat. "He does not know where he is going, and has no grasp of the future course of this journey," but out on the river, Liu experiences an ethereal feeling of peace, and a sense that "a hand is stroking his heart," a sensation of "absolute safety" so comfortable it feels as though he is back in his mother's embrace (Bei 2016, p. 271). A moment later he is thrown back to a world of decisions, aware, like Nicodemus, that "it is impossible to retract himself back into his mother's womb," and yet also aware that he has reached an impasse, a dead-end where it feels as though he is physically disintegrating.

"Heaven! he cried: if there is a god, I want to ask you, why have you brought me to such a state — didn't I have great wealth and property? Didn't I live well?...why is your punishment falling on me?...Why do you want to destroy me?" (Bei 2016, pp. 271–72).

Before his Job-like tirade continues, Liu Lang's cry turns to self-recrimination: what if he had become a doctor, if he had married Tianru? He could have lived a peaceful, pain-free life. As the boat carries on inexorably forward, it passes a graveyard in a patch of barren wilderness, overgrown with wormwood. Counting up all of his dead family members, Liu Lang is struck by a sudden sense that "he himself is a ghost."

"Why am I left alone? Why wasn't I allowed to die when I came out of the womb? Why didn't my birthday become a dark night?...Why have all around me died? How come I don't want to live but can't die?" (Bei 2016, p. 273).

The thirty-three questions Liu utters express his anguish, but also the paradoxes and contradictions of life. "Why give me eyes and yet dark night? Why give a mouth and desire to eat good food but no taste for it?" Liu asks the creator of the faculties, swinging between plaint and confession. "I've done too much evil; are you going to account it to my body? Why don't you let me die?" The boat starts leaking and Liu flounders, struggling for breath, until he grasps some reeds and sees a figure on the bank, arm outstretched, and is plucked from the mud and reeds. As the sound of prayer reaches him, the person tells him to change his clothes, and the narrator tells us that morning brightness had arrived.

Although Liu's river baptism seems highly unorthodox from a contemporary Protestant point of view, and, with no priest or recital of Trinitarian formulae the reader might indeed miss, or contest, that a baptism has just occurred, yet major elements of the ritual are present. Liu has acknowledged his failure. Having heeded a call, Liu accepts the end of his mastery over his own life. He is fully submerged when his boat takes water in. There is a symbolic death and resurrection as Liu Lang struggles for his last grasp of air, drowning. The waters of chaos release him. He is pulled out of mud

and reeds to the sound of prayer, and given a change of clothes by the evangelist who welcomes him, symbolically stripped naked before God.¹⁵ If baptism is illumination or photismos, at the moment Liu emerges from the waters, the skies lighten (Bei 2016, p. 275; cf. Radcliffe 2012, p. 228). A surging wave of prayer welcomes him into the community of saints. He opens himself up to judgement and examination in narrating his life story, and while his catechesis follows baptism, it is exceptionally thorough (producing a rather tedious section of narrative), even if Liu resists or questions some of the requirements of his new-found faith. There is, of course, biblical precedent for a seemingly backwards or out-of-sequence conversion. As Timothy Radcliffe writes of another dramatic volte-face, “Paul did not weigh up the arguments for and against Christianity and then make a mature option for Jesus. God burst roughly into his life and threw him to the ground...so God’s choice of us precedes our choice of God;” faith is a *response* to the discovery of chosen-ness (Radcliffe 2012, p. 9).

In the brief after-life of Liu’s baptism, we see that he has been liberated from violence, from his fatalism, and by extension, from the original sin of his innate nature (天性). In the final two chapters of the novel, a mere 25 pages out of 300, Liu hears the gospel message, engages with it, and returns to witness to his rival-turned-companion Ma Da. In his new immersion in Christian culture, hymns instruct his sleepy subconscious, while in his dreams a cross floats in a flooded landscape, forming an expanding life-raft and collecting all who are struggling in the water, like some Alice in Wonderland vision. In the cascade of waters in the novel, tears trickle down, the river flows, and the flood is redeemed by the cross. Christ as the “reversal of the flood” forms an ancient theme in Christianity (see, e.g., Williams 2018, p. 137). The trope of tears is a significant element in the depiction of Liu Lang. He is forever crying—as a child, on leaving home, at Tianru’s gentleness, at the dissection formaldehyde, at his own words, at thoughts of his family, when cradling his dead brother, at the awareness of his poverty of spirit—while his inability to emote, to produce tears at events like his mother’s funeral, and the performative tears of paid mourners, trouble him deeply. His life’s tears are redeemed in his prayer of conversion; when he prays: “Lord! I didn’t know of your grace; I was so obstinate and rebellious, but now I cry bitterly to you, I shed my tears towards you...” The evangelist picks up on his tears in responding to his long prayer: “Today your tears have a use; because they are shed to him, he will remember your tears. The people of the world cannot shed tears; they are ashamed even to say the word “love.” (Bei 2016, pp. 282–83).

If tears represent an overflow of interior emotion that cannot be contained, the river connecting childhood in Huotong, adult life in Zhangban, and rebirth in Du village, has been the site of many relational lows and highs in Liu’s life. The title of the novel could be translated “The River of Baptism,” but the verb-complement *shixi* (施洗 to carry out, to administer baptism) allows for the participle in English, and points to the active role of the river in the novel. The baptizing river again points back to older currents of Christianity, to Christ as Flowing Sea and Living Flood (in the terms of Ephrem the Syrian), and forwards to the river of the water of life in Revelation. The river raises long-debated questions about what happens in baptism, questions that run in parallel with arguments on paedobaptism as to whether the actor is God or human being, baptism a profession of faith or justification of sinners, and whether the sacrament confers new birth or symbolizes it. Was Liu Lang’s immersion-by-drowning a baptism, and if not, at what point in the narrative is his salvation effected? While Roman Catholic or Lutheran theology might hold that regeneration begins at baptism, Reformed theologians and Calvinists believe regeneration precedes faith, a stance that seems closest to Liu Lang’s experience (the Anglican position as clarified by the Privy Council in 1850 allows characteristic leeway: “that the grace may be granted before, in or after baptism,” while “baptism is an effectual sign of grace, by which God works invisibly within us, but only in such as worthily receive it.”¹⁶). If the river is a channel of grace, Liu Lang catches up with evangelical orthodoxy by

¹⁵ As Michael Green spells out, “Baptism is putting on a new suit of clothes;” see Galatians 3:27, “for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ;” (Green 2017, p. 46).

¹⁶ See, e.g., discussion on the Gorham Judgement in Green (2017, pp. 56–57). The latter clause is relevant in Liu Lang’s case, since, as with a marriage sacrament that may be declared void if not consummated, a baptism that does not lead to faith or commitment is held by many Protestants to be ineffectual (see Green 2017, p. 90).

uttering a long prayer of repentance and commitment soon after, as he is taken into a church community. The symbolic change may have happened in the immersion into the waters of the river (no further baptismal ritual is described), but in the eyes of the evangelist catechizing Liu, salvation comes through faith, “you only have to believe in him and you will freely receive saving grace, and enter into his death and be resurrected together with him” (Bei 2016, p. 279) and it is Liu Lang’s prayer of faith and repentance that marks the culmination of his faith journey, the point at which “everything before his eyes had changed” (Bei 2016, p. 284). Salvation, moreover, cannot be wrested back from him—when doubts resurface and Liu confesses “I feel as though I’ve not been saved, my mood is still bad, I can’t do it...” the evangelist retorts: it is not about feelings; feelings are most unreliable, “if he [Jesus] says it’s done, then it’s done” (Bei 2016, p. 287).

There is a surprising second current to the baptism narrative, with the suggestion that the narrative itself is the baptizing river. After Liu Lang’s immersion in the river but before he prays his prayer of confession, it seems as if a great hand grasps hold of him, and will not release him. Liu continues:

I’m from Huotong, but I’ve spent the majority of my life in Zhangban, Liu Lang said to the evangelist—I want to tell you about some of the things that happened when I was there.

..... Liu Lang’s narrative unfurled across this lengthy afternoon; his description was filled with horrifying elements, like a dirty river in which were drifting dead rabbits and rubbish, with murky foam floating on the surface, and he was sinking in this river, futilely struggling in the water. But from start to finish the evangelist maintained a mild expression (Bei 2016, p. 277; ellipsis in the original).

The repetition of the language of flotsam and filth from the beginning of Liu Lang’s account to the evangelist (p. 56) re-introduces the frame to the novel, where the narrative is the text of his oral report—but with the twist that the narrative itself seems to be the river in which he floats; the long literary confession the baptizing river (and somehow instrumental in expunging his sins?). The physical river has the last word in the novel, however, as Liu Lang and Ma Da float on its moonlit waters, and Liu Lang tells him they are in Huotong. You can be baptized here.

6. Conclusions

What seems to be a long, godless biography of a disturbed life turns into an extended parable as Bei Cun’s first well-developed Christian character sheds light on the human psyche and its many distortions. The fleeting nature of Christian elements in the book before the lustral dénouement allows the novel to build up as a story and as a picture of Chinese society, whether in its setting of the 1940s or in its reflection of contemporary life; the tale has to work as novel or narrative, before it can act as a didactic metaphor. Chinese critics who have responded positively to *The Baptizing River* are united in acclaiming the importance of Bei Cun’s writing for bringing Christianity to “cultural public space” in China. Nan Fan argues that the significance of the novel lay in exploring the “pressing nature of the link between faith and existence,” and forcing readers to address a question latent in society. As Zhai Chongguang notes, the problem of evil is rarely addressed in Chinese fiction, although Bei Cun had earlier been interested in questions of ultimate meaning (Zhai 2018). The play between evil and superstition, and the many evils inherent in patriarchy and power relations are significant strands in the novel. For others, Bei Cun’s novel pointed to a collective malaise that highlighted the absence of the spiritual in society; Xie Youshun described the novel as “a true representation of the defeated spirit of our times” (Xie 2016, p. 317) as he outlined the stages of transition in the human spirit that the protagonist undergoes from emptiness and fear, through anxiety and despair to redemption. The portrayal of a psychologically credible, damaged character, whose self-delusion and questioning of identity go hand-in-hand is at the centre of critics’ responses.

Critics have also pointed to the significance of Bei Cun’s answers, or Christian perspective, on the questions he raises, but have rarely followed this through with further analysis. Xie Youshun notes that Bei Cun created a “new model” of character for contemporary fiction, one whose interior life and spiritual journey is exposed to the reader, while critic Shen Xiayan makes the obvious but

important point as she describes the great effect that reading Bei Cun had on her, that in his works of spiritual writing (神性写作) Bei Cun uses the lives of characters as a witness.¹⁷ The fact that Bei Cun is also proposing a solution to the crisis he addresses needs taking seriously. Part of the problem in reaction to *The Baptizing River* is that the answer, the saving grace that the protagonist experiences, is one of the less successful literary elements. Since publication, critics have noted the suddenness of conversion in Bei Cun's early Christian writing, alongside a rather preachy style (the dialogue with the evangelist in the final chapter is practically a verbatim catechesis).¹⁸ The simplicity and speed of baptism—and its power to wipe out a life-time of extreme suffering and evil—appears unrealistic, as does the seeming disjunction in Liu Lang himself: a taciturn, introspective character suddenly engages in a torrent of prayer, a monologic questioning of God, in the language of Hebrew scriptures he has not read. This too-sudden metamorphosis sits uneasily with Bei Cun's skilful depiction of the psychology of childhood, of abuse and addiction, and with the gradual nature of conversion conveyed in the narrative arc. For all Bei Cun's flair in portraying the interior life of his protagonist Liu Lang, the Christian character appears incongruous, with seemingly little continuity in voice across his conversion. This is particularly discordant since Bei Cun's point through the structure of the novel has been to emphasize God's presence and provision throughout the course of a life.

As the discussion of baptism above suggests, Bei Cun in this novel early in his Christian life offers both a straightforward evangelical perspective (through the post-immersion catechesis by the evangelist and the transcription of the prayer of conversion itself; and in the priority given to individual conversion at a time of great national need) and a more complex, literary-theological response in the manner of the baptism. This may not be incongruent with Bei Cun's own ecclesial position, as a member of an unregistered ("house") church that was a gathering point for Beijing intellectuals and writers. In his quest to find a way to speak as a Christian in an authentic, inculturated voice, Bei Cun resorts to copious stretches of biblical language in the final two chapters, some lifted almost directly, like the Job-like questioning and a long passage from Ezekiel reproduced verbatim at the conclusion of the novel. The dialogue with the evangelist or local preacher is stilted and formulaic; while this is a function of the need to convey the Christian message clearly to Liu Lang (and readers), it comes across more as catechism than conversation. In his new writing, Bei Cun is attempting two feats: to find a language for a modern Chinese Christian, and to find a narrative form in which to express a new comprehension of meaning, where life itself is no longer absurd. How to concatenate meaning and expression, which had become increasingly divorced from each other in the avant-garde literature from which Bei Cun came, is the second strand in the struggle, as this very earthy novel seeks to describe a world made whole.

Despite these visible seams, there is also great subtlety in the novel, as this essay has shown. The depravity of human sin is counterbalanced by God's care throughout a life. The narrative arc of a human life, where the plotline is the self-awareness and growth of the character, is used to great effect. The waters in which Liu Lang commits his most heinous crimes are the same waters that wash him clean: the waters of tears, of the river that guides his life's journeys, of the flood that engulfs him. The natural waters of human life become tears of repentance, ablution and absolution in Christ, and a sign of God's covenant. Some of the literary effects that Bei Cun created in this novel as he discarded prior modes are highly efficacious. Time is used to effect, speeding up and slowing down the narrative in line with Liu Lang's mental state and well-being, but within a strongly linear setting. Narrative techniques which Bei Cun inherited from Borges et al., such as the recurrent narration of a single moment to show multiple perspectives,¹⁹ are reduced, or subverted to make a point: here any sense of cyclical time appears only in superstitious or fearful minds, a cycle of false hope and of generational pain, countered by a unidirectional movement towards salvation. Liu Lang's baptism

¹⁷ (Shen 2007, p. 128). Shen describes how, on reading Bei Cun's *I have a Contract with God* (我和上帝有个约) she shut herself in her student room and did not eat or go to class, enveloped in a post-reading stupor.

¹⁸ Cf. (Zhai 2018, p. 73). Shen Xiayan, writing of the rapidity of conversion from a murderer to seeking righteousness in Bei Cun's *Anger* (愤怒) notes "in terms of reader's experience, it seems to lack rationality" (Shen 2007, pp. 128–29).

¹⁹ See, e.g., (Zhang 2007, pp. 273–74).

neither reverences western orthodoxy nor remains within one sign system. It is, however, highly effective, and the replay of Liu's obstinacy and conversion in miniature in the life of his friend Ma in the final chapter underlines the urgency of the process for readers.

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