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Heaven as the Deus:

Confucian Religiosity and the Confucian-Christian Dialogue Since the Late Ming

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Abstract: The religiously characterized concepts of Heaven (天) and Shangdi (上帝) found in pre-Qin Confucian classics served as the foundation for Confucian-Christian dialogue during the late Ming period. The Confucian understanding of "Heaven" varied across different historical eras. In the pre-Qin period, expressions such as *duiyue* (对越), *linge* (临格), *zhaoshi* (昭事), and *shitian* (事天) all possessed distinctly religious features. However, by the time of the Song Confucians, religious interpretations of "Heaven" were notably weakened. It was not until the late Ming, with the introduction of Catholicism, that the literati began to revive or reinforce Confucian religiosity, emphasizing Heaven's function in reward and punishment. Missionaries, for their part, equated the Confucian concept of Heaven with the Christian God. Under the shared theme of "reverence for Heaven," both East and West, Confucianism and Christianity, engaged in dialogue and exchange through the approach of "one Heaven, different interpretations" (一天各表). The interpretative ambiguity, pluralism, and openness inherent in the Confucian classics made such Confucian-Christian dialogue possible. However, as the Chinese Rites Controversy unfolded, these interpretive possibilities collapsed. The "one Heaven, different interpretations" approach exemplifying the Confucian-Christian dialogue of the Ming and Qing periods offers valuable insights for contemporary discussions on the Sinicization of Christianity and inter-civilizational exchange.

Keywords: Confucian religiosity, Heaven, Confucian-Christian dialogue

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The question of religiosity in Confucianism has long been debated in academic circles, with various and sometimes conflicting perspectives. [1] Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Confucianism contains certain elements and characteristics of religiosity. Whether such "religiosity" qualifies Confucianism as a religion per se, or to what extent it does, remains a subject of contention. In this article, "religiosity" refers to the reverence toward an external object characterized by transcendence and the attributes of a personal deity.[2] The core assumption is that this transcendent entity has the power to reward good and punish evil. Based on this definition, one can find religious expressions throughout the Confucian canon from the pre-Qin period onward. Drawing on the distinctions made by missionaries such as Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), we find that early Confucian texts are more inclined toward depictions of a personal deity, whereas later Confucians—particularly in the Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming—tended to moralize and ethicize religious expressions. In other words, the religiosity expressed by early Confucians more closely aligns with monotheism, while later Confucian religiosity often became a vehicle for moral discourse.[3]

In this light, the present article explores the religious dimension of Confucianism and its dialogue with Christianity through key terms such as *duiyue* (对越), *zhaoshi* (昭事), *shitian* (事天), and *linge* (临格). The article argues that, on one hand, Confucianism inherently contains expressions of religiosity; on the other, such expressions served as a foundation for dialogue with Christianity. These concepts were extensively employed by Jesuit missionaries and Confucian Christians in the late Ming and early Qing, ultimately giving rise to a product of Confucian-Christian dialogue: Confucian Monotheism. Precisely because of shared positions on religiosity, many Ming-dynasty literati found Christianity acceptable. Figures such as Li Yong (李颙, 1627-1705), Xu Sanli (许三礼, 1625-1691), and Wang Qiyuan (王启元, 1559-?) were directly or indirectly influenced in their efforts to revive a "religious" Confucianism.

Although the atheistic tendencies within Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism were rejected by missionaries, they nonetheless discovered a different

[1] The discussion concerning the religious nature of Confucianism originated with Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) during the late Ming Dynasty. This debate became more concrete and focused during the Chinese Rites Controversy. Contemporary discussions mainly revolve around the question of whether Confucianism qualifies as a religion (Chen 2010). Proponents of Confucianism as a religion include Ren Jiyu and his disciples, such as Li Shen (Li 2018). Multiple versions of this work exist. Opponents have published critical anthologies, such as Ju Xi (Ju 2003; Ren 2000; Han 2004; Jensen 1998; Chen 2013; Sun 2013).

[2] For definitions of a personal deity, see Fu Peirong (2010, pp. 6-7).

[3] It should be noted that some Confucians do indeed treat Confucianism as a religion and practice it accordingly. This paper primarily discusses the issue from the standpoint of mainstream Confucianism.

approach among figures such as Zhang Juzheng (张居正, 1525-1582) and Emperor Kangxi (1654-1722), who sought to reinforce moral cultivation through a transcendent "Other" (God or Heaven). This view was more consistent with Christian conceptions of God. Thus, when Emperor Kangxi conferred upon the missionaries a plaque bearing the inscription *Respect Heaven* (敬天), the missionaries interpreted it as reverence for the Creator—namely, God—and Kangxi himself concurred with this interpretation. This indicates a certain tacit understanding between the state-endorsed Neo-Confucianism of Kangxi's court and the missionary conception of Confucian Monotheism.

However, this tacit understanding was disrupted by the Chinese Rites Controversy, and the interpretive process of "one Heaven, different interpretations" was forcibly brought to an end. Consequently, the early Qing era saw the breakdown of cultural exchange and mutual interpretation between China and the West. Even so, the intellectual legacy of "one Heaven, different interpretations" had a lasting impact on Christian thought in the late Qing and modern periods. While scholarly studies of Confucian religiosity and Catholic translations during the late Ming and early Qing abound, few works have offered a focused analysis of "one Heaven, different interpretations." This article contends that the phrase aptly summarizes the Confucian-Christian dialogue and its contributions in the late Ming and early Qing, and thus merits greater attention from both academia and the Church.

The Religious Heaven: "Religious Expressions" in Pre-Qin Confucian Texts

In the classical Confucian canon, terms such as *duiyue* (对越), *linge* (临格), and *zhaoshi* (昭事) clearly display characteristics of "religiosity," as their referents are transcendent and even bear the attributes of a personal deity. These referents specifically include *Shangdi* (the Lord on High), *Heaven*, various spirits and deities, as well as ancestors and ancestral temples. At times, they appear in more direct and concrete forms such as *shi tian* (事天), meaning "to serve Heaven."[4]

In pre-Qin literature, the term *duiyue* appears only once, in the *Book of Songs*, *Zhou Hymns*: "Gathered are the many ministers, upholding the virtue of culture. Duiyue in Heaven, they gallop and attend at the ancestral temple." Later exegetes following Zheng Xuan (郑玄, 127-200) offered divergent interpretations of *duiyue*. According to scholarly research, two major views have emerged. The first understands *dui* as "to pair" or "to correspond," and *yue* as an interjection. Zheng Xuan interprets the line "duiyue in Heaven" to mean: "These numerous

[4] For features of Shang Dynasty religion during the eras of the *Book of Songs* and *Book of Documents*, see Fu Peirong (Fu 2010, pp. 1-19; Li 1978).

ministers all practice the virtue of King Wen. The spirit of King Wen is already in Heaven, yet still paired and harmonized as if he were alive." (Mao 1999, p. 1282) In other words, although King Wen now resides "in Heaven," the "many ministers" continue to act in accordance with his virtue, treating him as though he were still alive and harmonizing with his legacy. Commentators of the Song and Ming periods largely followed Zheng Xuan's approach but shifted toward a moralized interpretation of "corresponding to Heaven," suggesting that King Wen's virtue could "correspond to the Emperor in Heaven."

The second interpretation views *dui* as "to respond," and *yue* as "to extol." Song-Ming and Qing scholars such as Yan Can (严粲) and Mou Ting (牟庭) predominantly adopted this view. Scholars consider the first interpretation to carry a "strong significance of religious ritual." (Zhai 2017, pp. 33-39) In practice, however, Zheng Xuan and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200)'s interpretations of "corresponding to Heaven" were framed in political or moral terms rather than explicitly religious ones. Zheng Xuan's exegesis in particular pioneered a tradition wherein *Shangdi* or *Heaven* became understood as the supreme standard of morality or ethics, rather than a religious deity.

This theme became a significant motif in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism: figures such as *Di* (the Lord) or *Heaven*, which once carried religious overtones, were reinterpreted as the highest moral or ethical exemplars—without emphasizing their religious character. Here, the internal tension or paradox within Confucian moral discourse becomes evident: on the one hand, Confucianism inherited notions of *Shangdi* and *Heaven* from classical texts like the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of Documents*, where these figures bore religious traits; on the other hand, it retained a humanistic orientation that downplayed this religiosity. On one side, *Di* or *Heaven* were portrayed as final authorities in moral instruction, endowed with the power to reward virtue and punish vice; yet simultaneously, Confucianism emphasized human moral autonomy and self-discipline, deemphasizing dependence on external systems of reward and punishment. The balance between moral autonomy and external authority (heteronomy) varied across different periods of Confucianism. Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, BC. 179-BC. 104)'s theory of the resonance between Heaven and humans (*tian ren ganying* 天人感应) leaned more toward heteronomy, whereas Wang Yangming's view that "everyone can become a Yao or Shun" emphasized moral self-governance.

However, the Confucian notion of heteronomy differs from that of Christianity. In Confucianism, it is primarily instrumental; in Christianity, it is teleological. As a result, due to either a deficiency in heteronomous justification or a tendency toward instrumentalism, Confucianism faced limitations in

moral reasoning—occasionally leading to ethical dilemmas, such as the problem of "the long life of the villain Zhi (盗跖) and the premature death of Yan Yuan (颜渊)," or the well-known "question of Sima Qian (司马迁, BC. 145-?)." To address these limitations, Confucianism often drew upon Buddhist and Daoist resources, borrowing Buddhist-Daoist moral texts such as *Yin Zhi Wen*, *Gong Guo Ge*, or tales of karmic retribution as tools for moral exhortation and warnings against evil.

Instances of *zhaoshi* (昭事) in pre-Qin texts are also rare: it appears once in the *Book of Songs*, once in the *Book of Documents*, once in the *Discourses of the States*, once in the *Book of Rites*, and three times in the *Zuo Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals*. In the *Book of Songs*, the reference reads: "This King Wen, cautious and respectful, zhaoshi to Shangdi." In the *Book of Documents*, it is: "At that time, Shangdi conferred his mandate upon King Wen. It was also through the former sages that the ministers could assist and zhaoshi their sovereign." In the *Discourses of the States*: "The upper [realm] thus instructs the people to be reverent, and the lower [realm] thereby zhaoshi the higher." The usage in the *Book of Rites* is a citation from the *Book of Songs*. Concerning the *zhaoshi* of Shangdi by King Wen in the *Book of Songs*, commentators generally interpret *zhao* as "to illuminate" or "to clarify"—that is, "to clearly understand the way of Heaven." As one commentary puts it: "By being respectful and cautious, one comes to understand the way of Heaven, follows it in practice, and thus seeks abundant blessings, ensuring that one's virtue does not go astray."(Mao 1999, p. 967) The *Mao Commentary to the Book of Songs* explains *zhaoshi Shangdi* as "clearly understanding the way of Heaven."

The religious dimension here is not particularly prominent. Such "secularized" (or humanistic) interpretations are common in the *Mao Commentary*, where, for example, "King Wen is above" is interpreted as "King Wen is above the people," and "King Wen ascends and descends, at the side of the Emperor" is rendered as "King Wen connects above with Heaven and below with the people." In the *Book of Documents* and *Discourses of the States*, the object of *zhaoshi* is not *Shangdi*. When *zhaoshi* in pre-Qin texts does relate to *Di* or *Heaven*, commentators often interpret the term through the lens of moral norms—using concepts like "corresponding to Heaven," "corresponding to the Lord," or "corresponding to virtue" to explain it, as in "the sage unites his virtue with Heaven and Earth."

The phrase *shi tian* appears frequently in pre-Qin literature. For instance, the *Book of Rites* states: "Without ritual, there is no means to properly serve the spirits of Heaven and Earth"; and, "Therefore, the way a benevolent person serves his parents is as he would serve Heaven, and the way he serves Heaven

is as he would serve his parents. Thus, the filial son perfects his person." It also notes: "In ancient times, the enlightened kings of the Three Dynasties all served the spiritual powers of Heaven and Earth. They relied solely on divination and augury, not daring to profane the Supreme Deity with personal motives." The *Book of Rites* contains not only the term "serving Heaven," but also phrases such as "serving the Supreme Deity" (事上帝), "serving Heaven, Earth, mountains, and rivers" (事天地山川), "serving heavenly spirits and human ghosts" (事天神与人鬼), and "serving Earth" (事地). Here, the term *shi* (事) is equivalent to *feng* (奉), carrying the connotations of reverence and veneration. Hence, the commentary on the *Book of Rites* remarks: "To serve one's parents and to serve Heaven are expressions of the same filial piety and reverence." Likewise, the *Classic of Filial Piety* (《孝经》) says: "In ancient times, the enlightened kings were filial to their fathers, hence they understood the clarity of Heaven; they were filial to their mothers; hence they understood the insight of Earth." Although later Confucian interpretations of this passage vary, all agree that filial piety connects one to Heaven and Earth and brings about a kind of spiritual resonance—inevitably leading to blessings in response. The *Classic of Filial Piety* conveys a strong religious tone through concepts such as "serving Heaven" and "divine presence."

However, Mencius—who focused on the doctrine of heart-nature (心性论)—unified the external Heaven with the internal moral nature. In the *Mencius*, it is stated: "To preserve the mind and nourish the nature—this is how one serves Heaven." The *Commentary and Sub-commentary on Mencius (Mengzi zhushu)* explain this clearly, asserting: "Knowing how to preserve one's mind and nurture one's nature—this is what enables one to serve Heaven. Since nature is endowed by Heaven, and nature is what a person receives from Heaven, thus the mind arises from nature." It further adds: "This is what it means to serve Heaven: nature is precisely Heaven. Therefore, to preserve the mind and nourish the nature is to serve Heaven." Whereas the *Book of Rites*, *Classic of Filial Piety*, and *Xunzi* advocate serving Heaven through external ritual actions, for Mencius, it becomes sufficient to preserve and cultivate the mind, because the human mind and nature are endowed by Heaven. We can observe that the concept of "Heaven" in Mencius' theory of heart-nature bears a stronger moral and ethical dimension than in the *Book of Rites* or the *Classic of Filial Piety*, where it retains a more religious connotation.

In contrast, Mozi—whom Mencius regarded as one "without father" and likened to a beast—treated Heaven as an external, transcendent force that rewards good and punishes evil. Thus, Mozi's discussions of "serving Heaven" are filled with religious meaning. In Volume One of the *Mozi*, it is written:

"Today, all the states, great or small, are settlements of Heaven. All people, young or old, noble or humble, are subjects of Heaven. For this reason, none fail to offer sacrificial sheep, raise dogs and pigs, and prepare libations of wine and rice to respectfully serve Heaven. Is this not proof that Heaven possesses all and nourishes all? If Heaven truly possesses and nourishes them, what reason could it have not to desire mutual love and benefit among people? Hence, it is said: those who love and benefit others will surely be blessed by Heaven; those who hate and harm others will surely be punished by Heaven." For Mozi, Heaven assumes the function of rewarding good and punishing evil, exhibiting the characteristics of a personal deity: "Therefore, those who love and benefit others align with Heaven's intent and receive Heaven's reward—can they not then hope to be spared? But those who hate and harm others, opposing Heaven's will—who can save them from Heaven's punishment?" He also asserts: "Now that all people dwell under Heaven and serve Heaven, if they offend Heaven, there will be no way to escape or hide."

Corresponding to concepts such as *duiyue* (对越), *zhaoshi* (昭事), and *shitian* (事天) are the terms *jiangge* (降格), *linge* (临格), and *lin* (临). *Duiyue*, *zhaoshi*, and *shitian* refer to sages, gentlemen, or ordinary people turning reverently toward a transcendent, external entity—expressions of reverence, or perhaps compliance and responsiveness, from below to above. Conversely, *jiangge*, *linge*, and *lin* denote the closeness of that transcendent, external being to humans—a movement from above to below. For example, the *Book of Documents* records: "Only the Emperor descended in judgment upon Xia." The *Zhengyi* commentary explains that "descending in judgment" (降格) refers to the Supreme Deity issuing omens to express reprimand. The *Book of Documents* also says: "When the Xia dynasty did not follow the proper path, the Supreme Deity descended in judgment." In addition to *jiangge*, there are terms like *zhijiang* (陟降) and *jiang* (降). The *Book of Songs* states: "The Supreme Deity is present with you—do not harbor a divided heart." And: "No duplicity, no worry—the Supreme Deity is present with you." Though interpretations of the term "divided heart" vary, all agree that "presence" (临) refers to the Supreme Deity's observation and watchfulness, akin to guardianship. This meaning is close to that of "Heaven sees through the eyes of the people, and hears through the ears of the people," as found in the *Book of Documents*.

In pre-Qin texts such as the *Book of Songs*, *Book of Documents*, *Classic of Filial Piety*, *Book of Rites*, and *Mozi*, the concept of "Heaven" or the "Supreme Deity" often bears the traits of a personal god.[5] Therefore, terms like *duiyue*, *zhaoshi*,

[5] Chen Mengjia believed that "Heaven" in the pre-Qin period did not refer to a personal deity, but Fu Peirong refuted this (Fu 2010, p. 7).

and *shitian* all carry religious significance. Yet starting with Mencius, Heaven is understood as the source of moral nature, imbued with ethical meaning. Both of these interpretive paths find expression in the later development of Confucian thought.

Heaven as Principle: The "De-religionization" of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism

The Han dynasty doctrine of *resonance between Heaven and humanity*, formulated by Dong Zhongshu, exhibits a theological-religious character. Although some scholars reject the classification of *Heaven-human resonance* as religious theology and instead argue that it reflects a structural homology between Heaven and humanity—thus enabling mutual vibration and sympathetic response—this interpretation fails to address why such homology between Heaven and humanity should exist in the first place. If Heaven is understood as structurally homologous to humanity, this itself implies an anthropomorphized, personified Heaven, bearing characteristics of a personal deity. Otherwise, as a purely natural Heaven, it cannot interact responsively with human beings.

Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism integrates Mencius's theory of heart and nature (*i*心性论) with the praxis of moral self-cultivation, situating the role of Heaven or the Supreme Deity at the culmination of moral effort, thus establishing it as a pivotal axis in ethical cultivation. Although the Song-Ming thinkers frequently cited pre-Qin Confucian classics, they often developed their own interpretive insights, diverging in meaning from the original texts. Within Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, the aforementioned tension remains: on the one hand, atheistic, materialist, and humanistic interpretations became mainstream; on the other, there was a simultaneous reinforcement of the transcendent, external referent as an active force in moral cultivation. However, unlike Christianity, where such a transcendent being often needs to be internalized as a state of moral self-cultivation or as an inner "moral imperative," in Neo-Confucianism it is not conceived as an independently existing personal deity.

In *The Collected Writings of the Cheng Brothers*, the phrase *duiyue* (对越)—meaning reverent communion—appears twice: "Loyalty and trustworthiness advance virtue; unceasing diligence throughout the day. The gentleman must maintain reverent communion with Heaven all day long! For the movement of Heaven is soundless and scentless; in substance it is called the *Yi* (易), in principle it is called the *Dao*, in function it is called the divine (神), and in its endowment to humans it is called nature. Following nature is called the Way;

cultivating the Way is called teaching. Mencius further elaborated this with the idea of 'flood-like qi'—this is indeed exhaustive! Thus, it is said that the divine is as though above, as though beside one's shoulders; whether in great or small matters, one only says: 'Sincerity—nothing can obscure it!' Penetrating above and below, it goes no further than this. What is metaphysical is called the Dao; what is physical is called the instrument. One must speak thus: the instrument is also the Dao, and the Dao is also the instrument. As long as the Dao is attained, it is not tied to time or person, whether now or later, self or others." (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 4)

Cheng Yi (程颐, 1033-1107)'s formulation of *"reverent communion with Heaven"* differs from Zheng Xuan's earlier interpretation. For Cheng, this reverent orientation becomes the primary object of the gentleman's unceasing vigilance—that is, the gentleman constantly looks toward the Supreme Deity, with solemn awe, as though standing on the edge of an abyss or walking on thin ice—never daring to slacken, never entertaining private motives. At the same time, however, this reverent gaze is not directed at a lofty Heaven transcending the mundane world, for human nature is endowed by Heaven, and in daily conduct, there is nothing outside of *Heavenly principle* (天理). Therefore, to commune with Heaven is merely to follow Heavenly principle. (Zhai 2017, p. 36) This interpretation aligns completely with the core tenets of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism: "The Way of the Sage pervades both above and below, from sweeping and responding in everyday life to the equal governance of the world—the principle remains one." (Wang 1989, p. 760)

The Collected Writings of the Cheng Brothers also states: "With nothing but reverence, one may commune with the Supreme Deity." In *The Essential Sayings of the Chengs*, it is written: "One who is never irreverent walks the path of communion with the Supreme Deity." Cheng Yi was the first to transform *"reverent communion with Heaven"* into *"reverent communion with the Supreme Deity"*, a formulation that had formative influence within Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. (Zhai 2017, p. 35) Yet, to take this as evidence that Cheng's notion of *duiyue* carries religious implications may be a misreading. For the Cheng brothers, the personified features of "Supreme Deity" or "Heaven" found in pre-Qin texts are abstracted and transformed into "Dao" or "principle" (理): "Heaven is principle; divinity is a term for the subtle and wondrous functions of all things; the term 'Deity' names the governing aspect of affairs." (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 132)

To the question, "What is the Way of Heaven?" the reply is: "It is merely this principle; principle is the Way of Heaven. For instance, when we speak of Heaven's wrath, it is certainly not that someone above is truly angry—rather,

it is simply that the principle is such." (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 290)

Cheng Yi further believed that the anomalies and portents recorded in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were responses between Heaven and humans. He noted that many people doubted the authenticity of such anomalies, yet in his view, these "responses" were indeed real. In other words, Cheng took these phenomena as expressions of Heaven's reward and punishment. However, only a personal deity could perform such a function.

In Zhu Xi's *Classified Conversations of Master Zhu*, volumes 69, 87, and 95, the phrase *duiyue* appears mostly in explanations of Cheng Yi. Zhu Xi maintained that *"reverent communion with Heaven"* interprets the gentleman's "unceasing diligence throughout the day." But Zhu also asserted: "If the human mind is upright, perfectly transparent inside and out, with not the slightest trace of selfish intention, then one may commune with the Supreme Deity—how could spirits and deities not submit to such a person?" (Zhu 1986, vol. 87, p. 2262) This *"communion with the Supreme Deity"* is consistent with Cheng's view. A superficial interpretation might read it simply as "opening oneself to the Supreme Deity," but this would be misleading. For Zhu Xi, terms such as *Di* (帝), *Shangdi* (上帝), and *Tian* (天) all refer to principle (理), and do not affirm a transcendent personal deity. Thus, the "Supreme Deity" here should not be understood as an external being, but rather as the highest standard of self-cultivation in the gentleman. As Zhu himself said of Heaven: "It is none other than the Great Void (太虛); if one exhausts the mind and understands nature, then Heaven is not external." (Zhu 1986, vol. 60, p. 1428)

The term *"serving Heaven"* also appears in *The Collected Writings of the Cheng Brothers*, as in: "Question: Heaven and Earth observe clearly, and the spirits manifest openly. Reply: The righteousness and sincerity with which one serves Heaven and Earth—when this is clear and evident, then the spirits naturally manifest. Question: Do spirits respond with resonance? Reply: Resonance is certainly within this. The utmost filiality and fraternal piety communicate with the spirits." (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 224)

Scholars interpret Cheng's phrase *"serving Heaven"* here as referring to "serving the clearly observing spirits." (Li 2005, p. 13) Yet in fact, this passage discusses handling human relations and external affairs with righteousness and sincerity. The so-called "spirits" do not refer to religious deities, but rather to the level of spiritual attainment reached through utmost filiality and fraternal devotion. Thus, Cheng criticized Wang Anshi for dividing the human Way (人道) and the Heavenly Way (天道), asserting instead: "The Way has never been divided into Heaven and man. It is simply that in Heaven, it is called

the Heavenly Way; on Earth, the earthly Way; in humans, the human Way." (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 282) Wang Anshi's sharp distinction between governance and serving Heaven contradicts the idea that "the Way is one." From the perspective of the unity of Heaven and humanity, Cheng's conception of *"serving Heaven"* emphasizes a relational dynamic between humanity and Heaven (or the external world), and the notion of *"reverence as the master"* (主敬) serves to delineate the nature of that relationship. Cheng also interpreted *"serving Heaven"* as "offering obedience"—here, "Heaven" clearly denotes the *Way of Heaven* or *Heavenly principle*, rather than a personal deity.

Cheng further stated: "The sage 'cultivates himself with reverence to bring peace to the people' and 'is profoundly respectful, thereby pacifying the world.' Only when both superiors and subordinates act with reverence will Heaven and Earth assume their rightful positions, all beings nurture themselves naturally, harmony pervades the vital forces, and how could the Four Spirits fail to descend? This embodies the Dao of authenticity, transparency, and compliance; intelligence and wisdom all arise from this. Thus, one serves Heaven and offers sacrifice to the Lord on High." (Cheng and Cheng 1981, p. 81) Here again, the emphasis is placed on serving Heaven and offering sacrifice to the Lord on High through reverence. Accordingly, Zhu Xi interprets "this" as "reverence."

Zhu Xi understood "serving Heaven" (*shi tian*) as the cultivation and nourishment of the mind and nature, stating, "To preserve and nourish them is to serve; the mind and nature are Heaven, and therefore it is called 'serving Heaven.'" Zhu further elaborated: "If Heaven commands filial affection between father and son, then you embody that affection; if Heaven mandates righteousness between ruler and subject, then you embody that righteousness. Otherwise, you are in defiance of Heaven." (Zhu 1986, vol. 60, p. 1428) In other words, the "Heaven" in this context refers to the Dao of Heaven (tian dao), and "serving Heaven" refers to "complying with the Way of Heaven," as he put it: "To serve Heaven is merely to submit and comply; there is nothing beyond this." (Zhu 1986, vol. 60, p. 1433)

Zhu Xi also used "serving Heaven" and "serving one's parents" to interpret Zhang Zai's *Western Inscription*, stating: "The *Western Inscription* is not fundamentally about filial piety, but about serving Heaven, though it expresses this through the heart of serving one's parents." (Zhu 1986, vol. 98, p. 2522) "The principle of serving one's parents is precisely the image of serving Heaven." (Zhu 1986, vol. 98, p. 2526) Thus, for Zhu Xi, to speak of serving Heaven is effectively to speak of serving one's parents—namely, an act of compliance and submission.

Cai Shen (蔡沈, 1167-1230), a disciple of Zhu Xi, interpreted the "Five Blessings and Six Extremities" in the *Hongfan* chapter of the *Book of Documents* as "the response of Heaven to human stimulus." Later interpretations frequently aligned the Five Blessings and Six Extremities of *Hongfan* with the Buddhist and Daoist notion of karmic retribution, thereby endowing Heaven or the Lord on High with the traits of a personal deity. Without such personification, the effects of the Five Blessings and Six Extremities would be difficult to explain. Of course, Zhu Xi, Cai Chuan, and others emphasized "resonant response" primarily from the standpoint of political Confucianism, stressing a sense of reverence and awe toward Heaven or the Lord on High as conducive to moral cultivation (Wu 2012).

"Communing with" (*duiyue*) and "serving Heaven" (*shi tian*) thus became central components of the cultivation and praxis theory (*gongfu lun*) in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. Although they cannot be entirely subsumed under the rubric of immanent transcendence, they are clearly distinct from the "external transcendence" of Christianity. Lu Jiuyuan's concept of "complete cultivation" is exemplified in his assertion: "The Lord on High watches over you; let there be no duplicity in your heart. Be reverent and cautious—how could there be idle moments?" "Even in times of no apparent activity, never forget to be cautious and respectful, for you are manifestly serving the Lord on High." Yet for Lu Jiuyuan, "the Lord on High" essentially refers to Heaven itself: "Only the Sovereign Lord on High instills the norm (*zhong*) in the common people. The *zhong* is the ultimate. All people possess this ultimate, though their vital endowment may be pure or turbid, their intellect open or obstructed (Lu 1935, p. 280)." To "manifestly serve the Lord on High" is thus synonymous with "communing with Heaven" or "serving Heaven." Lu emphasized serving Heaven through one's own nature, since one's nature is endowed by Heaven. Although the human form differs from Heaven and Earth, one can understand and serve Heaven by fulfilling one's nature: "Truly, there is no principle beyond my own nature; whoever can fully realize their nature, even should they try to differ from Heaven and Earth, will find it impossible (Lu 1980, p. 347)."

Zhen Dexiu (真德秀, 1178-1235) also linked the service of Heaven with the service of one's parents: "Since one possesses a body, one therefore possesses a heart; possessing a heart, one therefore possesses a nature—this is what Heaven and Earth have bestowed upon me." "To serve Heaven is precisely to observe how one serves one's father and mother. How could there be two separate Ways in Heaven and Earth (Zhen 2005, p. 72)?" Zhen Dexiu's interpretation of the *Western Inscription* is both precise and nuanced: "Heaven has endowed me with this principle, and there is nothing within it that is not supremely good. If

I betray it, then I am Heaven's unworthy child. But if, having received human form, I can fulfill the nature of humanity, then I am Heaven's worthy child. The coming of fortune or misfortune, blessing or calamity, ought to be accepted rightly and calmly. If Heaven bestows its grace upon me, it is not out of favoritism, but to furnish me with the resources to do good, thereby deepening its demands upon me. This is like serving one's parents: they love and delight in their child, never forgetting them. If Heaven grieves or afflicts me, it is not out of malice, but to temper and strengthen my will. This is like serving one's parents: they are angry out of love, not to be resented. To extrapolate from this: parents are Heaven, and Heaven is parents—can there be two different modes of service? To serve one's parents is to serve Heaven, as the dutiful child serves his parents. And as Confucius said, such a one is a man of *ren*—for the highest form of filial piety is *ren*." (Zhong 2011, p. 58) Zhen Dexiu, too, understood the service of Heaven from the standpoint of compliance and submission.

From the perspective of praxis, Zhen Dexiu offered a detailed exposition of the Dao of serving Heaven: "Then what is the true Dao by which a ruler serves Heaven? The *Book of Songs* says: 'The Lord on High watches over you; let there be no duplicity in your heart.' It also says: 'Be single-minded and free of anxiety, for the Lord on High watches over you.' To be free of duplicity is to be unified. The key to unification is reverence; and the ability to be unified comes from sincerity. The reason King Tang could serve Heaven was because he said: 'Reflect with clarity upon the Mandate.' The reason King Wen could serve Heaven was because he said: 'Be cautious and vigilant.' Is this not all a matter of inner cultivation rather than external pursuit? If the ruler understands this, then there is no need for ostentatious construction or extravagant ritual. With solemn self-discipline, constantly as though communing with the divine, there is no need to wait for omens, oracles, or ritual codes—wherever he goes, he walks with the spirits." Though this was written as a memorial to the throne, it clearly illustrates that for Zhen Dexiu, the service of Heaven is not sought externally, but arises from internal reverence and sincerity. "With solemn self-discipline, constantly as though communing with the divine," the ruler thereby "walks among kingship," fully immersed in sacred governance.

The Thought of Revering Heaven: The Religious Revival of Confucianism in the Late Ming and Early Qing

It can be observed that the religious dimension implied in terms such as *duiyue* (facing with reverence), *zhaoshi* (manifest service), *shi tian* (serving Heaven), and *linge* (divine proximity) in pre-Qin texts—suggesting a kind of personal deity—had become nearly invisible in the discourse of Song Confucians. On the contrary, the Song Confucians developed further the

Mencian teachings on mind-nature and serving Heaven, thereby forming a theory of moral cultivation and spiritual attainment. Although, for the sake of moral self-cultivation, Song Confucians acknowledged the existence of a supreme Lord or Heaven, the personal deity characteristics had already been lost. Some scholars argue, however, that within the Confucian exegetical tradition of interpreting the Five Blessings and Six Extremities in the *Hongfan* chapter, a religious dimension is present. These Confucians, including the Song philosophers, regarded the Five Blessings and Six Extremities as expressions of karmic retribution; thus, this form of interpretation constitutes a religious mode of thought (Wu 2012, pp. 110-120). Nevertheless, this interpretation bears a strong humanistic orientation and lacks features akin to the personal deity in Christianity.

This very "absence" contributed to Confucianism's lack of sufficient competitive resources when confronted with the rise of Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religions. It also left Confucianism morally weakened in discourse and preaching when facing the deterioration of ethics and disintegration of social order brought about by the development of the commercial economy. As a result, thinkers such as Gao Panlong (高攀龙, 1562-1626) remarked that Confucianism "fundamentally does not require assistance from the Two Traditions" (i.e., Buddhism and Daoism). (Gao 2011a, p. 168) Moreover, relying entirely on the sovereign's "self-discipline" to restrain imperial power appeared insufficient to inspire full confidence in Confucianism, thus necessitating recourse to a Heaven or Supreme Being higher than imperial authority—such as through concepts like Heaven-human resonance or the divine sanction of kingship. Both responses to Confucianism's lack of "religiosity" found clear expression during the late Ming.

Zhang Juzheng's explanation of "ghosts and spirits" differs from that of Zhu Xi. While Zhu Xi, following the views of the Cheng brothers and Zhang Zai, regarded ghosts and spirits as the efficacious functions of the two vital forces (yin and yang), Zhang Juzheng understood them as the spirits venerated in sacrificial rites—including heavenly deities, terrestrial spirits, and ancestral ghosts. Although these spirits are formless and voiceless, Zhang asserted they are "clearly manifest in people's minds and eyes," existing everywhere and at all times. Thus, one must "fear and reverently serve" them. (Zhang 2010, p. 32) We may observe that Zhang Juzheng's interpretation is significantly more "religious" than Zhu Xi's. "The rites of suburban and ancestral sacrifices are for serving the Supreme Heaven." In this, Zhang's understanding aligns with Zhu Xi, as both take these as rites for the worship of Heaven and Earth. Yet in explaining this passage, Zhang further noted: "The visible and invisible realms are one in principle, though the invisible is difficult to know; gods and humans

follow one path, though the gods are difficult to approach. If one can penetrate the unseen and move the divine, then governing the visible world becomes no difficulty at all (Zhang 2010, p. 37)." Zhang held that interaction between gods and humans occurs through "resonance," and that clarity in the unseen enables clarity in governance.

In his commentary on the *Shangshu*, Zhang Juzheng's readings of "Heaven," "Supreme Heaven," and "Imperial Court" are replete with religious characteristics. Heaven may "inflict punishments upon people," "send dark omens upon the common folk," or "bring down great calamities." The "Mandate of Heaven" and "Heaven's intention" interact with the ruler; if a ruler desires the enduring Mandate of Heaven, "it lies in praying with virtue, not in seeking blessings through ritual sacrifice (Zhang 2010, p. 231)." Zhang Juzheng depicted "Supreme Heaven" and "man" in a relationship embodying the traits of a personal deity, which is especially evident in the following interpretation of a passage from *Shangshu – Duoshi*:

> *"Supreme Heaven bestows goodness upon man, that he might turn inward and cultivate himself—this is to lead him toward a land of ease and peace. Yet Xia Jie lost his good heart, willingly rushed toward peril, and refused to go to the land of peace—so degenerate was his virtue. Supreme Heaven still could not bear to sever him immediately, and thus sent down disasters and portents to warn Jie, hoping he might feel fear and reform. But Jie still did not awaken to fear or awe, nor did he reverently accept the decrees of Supreme Heaven. He indulged in licentious excess, perishing as his fate dictated. He even falsified Heaven's commands, and so Heaven found his deeds unworthy, disregarded him, and refused to listen. Ultimately, it rescinded the Great Mandate, enacted divine punishment, and the Xia dynasty met its end."* (Zhang 2013, p. 310)

Here, "Supreme Heaven" not only grants man the good but also actively "descends decrees" and uses "disasters and portents" to admonish Xia Jie. Yet Jie failed to reform— "still did not awaken to fear"—and so Heaven finally "rescinded the Great Mandate," bringing an end to the Xia dynasty's "Heavenly destiny." Such portrayals of "Heaven" and "Supreme Heaven" rewarding virtue and punishing vice are abundantly evident in Zhang Juzheng's interpretations.

Upon reading Zhang Juzheng's *Straightforward Explication of the Four Books*, the Kangxi Emperor remarked: "I have read Zhang Juzheng's *Straightforward Explication* of the *Four Books* and the *Shangshu*—the interpretations are precise and substantial, free from speculative or empty language, and may serve as a model (Zhao 1999, p. 202)." Kangxi not only praised Zhang's interpretations but also reflected similar ideas in his own imperially commissioned

commentaries on Confucian classics. For instance, his *Explanations from the Imperial Lectures on the Book of Documents* echoes Zhang's reading of the same passage in *Duoshi* almost verbatim. In his works such as *Imperial Lectures on the Four Books*, Kangxi emphasized the divine reward and punishment of "Heaven" and "Supreme Heaven," frequently invoking terms such as "*duiyue*," "*shi tian*," and "*jiangge*." *Imperial Lectures on the Book of Documents* states: "The sage serves Heaven and governs the people—nothing departs from a heart of reverence. Reverence for Heaven is manifested in precision in calendrical phenomena; diligence for the people is manifested in punctuality in the seasons. In all affairs, where did the sage not act with reverence—especially in serving Heaven and governing the people? Thus, it is said that for emperors and kings, reverence is the root of self-cultivation and the foundation of good governance (Xuanye 2016b, p. 3)." The *Imperial Lectures on the Book of Rites* further stated: "Just as the sovereign serves Heaven, merit and guilt are clearly revealed, and promotion or demotion is solely in accordance with divine command (Xuanye 2016a, p. 73)." In other words, "Heaven" grants rewards or punishments in accordance with human merit or fault. Contemporary to Kangxi, Li Guangdi also discussed this "Heaven" of rewards and punishments extensively in his writings (Li n. d.) Lu Longqi, for his part, took an oath before the "City God" to remind himself of his duty to diligent governance and benevolent rule. Lu understood the relationship between the City God and Supreme Heaven as akin to that between minister and sovereign (Lu n. d.).

Beyond Zhang Juzheng and the Kangxi Emperor, numerous scholar-officials during the Ming–Qing transition sought to revive or highlight the religious dimension of Confucianism and to practice it in their daily lives—figures such as Li Erqu (李二曲, 1627-1705), Wen Xiangfeng (文翔凤, 1577-1642), Xu Sanli, Xie Wenjian (谢文洊, 1615-1681), and Zhong Fang (钟芳), among others. Wang Qiyuan even attempted to construct a religious form of Confucianism, namely "Confucianism as a religion" (*Kongjiao*). (Wang 2004) Concurrently, the trend of "revering Heaven" (*jing tian*), closely tied to the religious revival of Confucianism, gained broad traction during the Ming–Qing period (Liu 2014, pp. 11-19).

In the late Ming, Ge Yinliang (葛寅亮, 1570-1646) strongly criticized the Song Confucians for reducing "Shangdi" to a mere sovereign figure and for their atheistic interpretations. He wrote: "The ancients conducted all their actions with reverence toward Shangdi and maintained a relationship of mutual responsiveness with Heaven. But later Confucians did not believe in spirits and deities, and thus treated Shangdi as a nonentity. Without belief in Shangdi, they consequently regarded the common people as fit for abuse, and the governance of the Three Dynasties could no longer be seen in the world (Ge

1997, p. 483).” Ge Yinliang believed that it was precisely the disbelief in spirits and deities among the Song Confucians that led to disbelief in Shangdi. And without belief in Shangdi, there could be no sense of reverence and awe. Consequently, people acted as they pleased and “regarded the common people as fit for abuse,” making the political order of the Three Dynasties unrecoverable. In other words, Ge attributed the moral collapse and disintegration of order in the late Ming to a loss of reverence brought about by disbelief in Shangdi. He emphasized the moral and educative function of Shangdi as an absolute “Other,” offering a reflection on Confucianism’s overreliance on self-discipline and excessive optimism about the idea that “anyone can become a sage like Yao or Shun.”

Likewise, Huang Zongxi (黄宗羲, 1610-1695) made similar criticisms of the Song Confucians’ concept of Heaven: “Now, when Confucians speak of Heaven, they take it merely as principle. Yet the Book of Changes says that Heaven generates all beings, and the Book of Songs states that Heaven brings down calamity. Clearly, in the unseen realm, there is in fact a sovereign that presides over all. Otherwise, the four seasons would be thrown into confusion, and humans, animals, plants, and trees would be indistinguishable and chaotic. The ancients established the suburban sacrifices—could it really be that they performed these merely as ritualized tradition, with no expectation of a real response or reception? Surely something real and substantial exists in this process. How, then, can we reduce it all to a hollow term like 'principle'?” (Huang 1985, p. 195; Wang 2004, p. 87) Although Huang Zongxi opposed the conception of a personal deity, he also rejected the reduction of Heaven to abstract principle. He insisted that “in the unseen realm, there is truly something that governs all.” He opposed the secularist interpretations of the suburban sacrifices by thinkers such as Xunzi and Zhu Xi, and argued that these rituals must have a real object of veneration. To deny such an object would render the suburban sacrifices mere theatrical performances, contradicting the Confucian emphasis on the unity of knowledge and action.

Sun Qifeng (孙奇逢, 1584-1675), meanwhile, proposed that one should “study in accordance with the ways of Heaven,” advocating the existence of an interactive relationship between human beings and Shangdi (Heaven). “To offer sacrifice to Shangdi is to be in His presence as though He were truly there. And only those who are virtuous can truly offer such sacrifice. By gathering the vital forces of all nations and harmonizing them to serve Shangdi—how could Shangdi not respond clearly and distinctly (Sun 1995, pp. 902-903)?” Sun emphasized mutual responsiveness, or *duiyue*, between humans and Heaven: “From ancient to modern times, all things and people exist beneath the vault of Heaven and upon the earth’s surface, illuminated by the sun and moon, and

they are indeed capable of entering into mutual responsiveness with Heaven and Earth (Sun 1995, p. 159)." Sun Qifeng thus highlighted the central status of Heaven within the Confucian framework.

Gao Panlong, leader of the Donglin movement, in a memorial to the Wanli Emperor, employed the doctrine of *Heaven–Human Resonance* (*tianren ganying*) to urge the emperor to maintain vigilance over his inner moral state: "The mind of the ruler is united with Heaven—it breathes in harmony with it. A single good thought receives Heaven's good response; a single evil thought receives Heaven's evil response, just as a shadow follows form, without the slightest deviation. Hence, the sage-kings of old were constantly diligent, preserving their inner state in communion with Heaven. This is why it is said: 'Vast Heaven,' and 'Heaven shines down upon you, O King,' and 'Vast Heaven dawns anew.'" He continued, "The sovereign of my mind is Shangdi Himself. Thus, it is said: 'Shangdi watches over you, do not waver in your heart'; 'Be cautious and reverent in serving Shangdi.' The moment one lets go of this heart, one has wavered—and that is no way to serve Shangdi." Here, Gao Panlong's "Heaven" is not merely the Heaven of moral cultivation proposed by Song Confucians, but one that assumes a role of moral judgment and reward and punishment, "like a shadow following form, without the slightest error." He also emphasized the need for reverence and awe toward Heaven: "Nowadays, people would not dare be disrespectful in the presence of a great guest—how could one not be reverent when in communion with Shangdi? Thus it is said: 'Ceaseless vigilance all day, ceaseless responsiveness to Heaven.' The petty person does not understand the Mandate of Heaven and therefore feels no awe; hence, he commits evil in private, without restraint—this is no surprise. If one studies without understanding Heaven, then even if one forces oneself to do good, it is not genuine (Gao 2011b, p. 397)"

Similarly, Wang Fuzhi (王夫之, 1619-1692) urged that one must use a "pure and upright heart to enter into responsiveness with the spirits. Act with integrity—what room is there for flattery or concealment?… This heart and this principle—Shangdi sees it all. Those who excel at flattery earn Heaven's condemnation (Wang 1999, p .1707)."

The reverence for, awe toward, invocation of, and prayer to Heaven in the writings of late Ming and early Qing scholar-officials—along with practices such as *cautious solitude* (Liu Zongzhou 刘宗周, 1578-1645) and *reverent fear* (Xue Xuan 薛瑄)—represent efforts to restore or reinforce the position of a religiously-inflected Heaven within the Confucian ideological framework. This religious revival in Confucianism was closely tied on one hand to the social conditions of the late Ming, and on the other to the influence of Western

Catholicism during this period. Figures such as Wen Xiangfeng, Ge Yinliang, and Gao Panlong had direct or indirect contact with Catholicism.

In other words, the arrival of Catholicism in the late Ming both appropriated existing religious elements within Confucianism—transforming them into a form of Confucian monotheism—and, in turn, prompted late Ming and early Qing scholar-officials to reflect on and revitalize the religious dimension of *Tian* and *Shangdi*. In sum, the religious formulations found especially in the pre-Qin Confucian classics became the foundation for the dialogue and integration between Confucianism and Christianity in the late Ming and early Qing.

Heaven as the Lord of Heaven: The Jesuit Discovery and Transformation of the "Religious Expressions" in Pre-Qin Confucianism in the Late Ming

Matteo Ricci, who entered China during the late Ming dynasty, acutely perceived the "religious" expressions embedded in Pre-Qin Confucian classics, as well as the dissatisfaction among contemporary scholar-officials with the materialist interpretations of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. Ricci thus presented himself to the literati of the late Ming as one attempting to restore the religious dimension of the Confucian concept of "Heaven." As a result, Ricci's discourse bore a distinctly "retroactive" tendency while also conveying a critical stance, thereby resonating with the sentiments of many scholar-officials of his time.

Ricci's most significant contribution was the proposition that "Our Lord of Heaven is what the Chinese call Shangdi," thereby inaugurating the project of a Sino-Christian theological synthesis in the Chinese language (Ji 2012). Ricci's endeavor involved reinterpreting the "Shangdi" found in Pre-Qin Confucian texts into a monotheistic framework and criticizing the ethical and moral reinterpretation of Heaven or Shangdi found in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. Ricci's interpretation began directly from the classical texts themselves, bypassing later commentarial traditions and offering his own exegesis. For example, Ricci asserted, "The ritual of suburban sacrifice is to serve Shangdi." While commentators such as Zhu Xi and Zhang Juzheng held that "Shangdi" already encompassed "Houtu" (Earth Deity), they did not mention that "Houtu" was a case of "abbreviated writing." Based on the *Book of Songs*, *Book of Changes*, *Book of Rites*, and *Book of Documents*, Ricci concluded: "I humbly believe that Confucius was committed to the indivisibility of the One and could not have abbreviated the text so arbitrarily (Ricci 1964, p. 415)."

In arguing for the existence of the Lord of Heaven, Ricci drew on the resources of scholastic philosophy, especially those of Thomas Aquinas,

demonstrating a form of reasoning and speculation that sharply diverged from Chinese traditions. Ricci placed particular emphasis on analogical reasoning, making his arguments especially compelling. For instance, he wrote: "A household has but one head, a state but one sovereign. If there were two, the state would fall into disorder. A human has but one body, and one head; if there were two, it would be monstrous indeed. From this I infer that within the universe, though there are many classes of spirits, there is only one Lord of Heaven who created Heaven, Earth, humanity, and all things, and who continuously governs and sustains them. Why should you doubt this?" (Ricci 1964, pp. 393-394)

Ricci restored the "Heaven" of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism to the "Shangdi" of the Six Classics, and then reinterpreted the "Shangdi" of the Six Classics as the "Lord of Heaven." Thus, for Ricci, "Heaven," "Shangdi," and "Lord of Heaven" formed an equivalence. From Ricci's perspective, the understandings of Heaven proposed by Zhu Xi and the Cheng brothers—whether as principle (li) or as physical form—were erroneous.

Why, then, are the religious expressions in Pre-Qin Confucian classics relatively subdued in the teachings of Confucius, Mencius, and the Song Confucians? Because religious expressions inevitably raise issues of reward and punishment. Yet once reward and punishment are invoked, moral exhortation becomes utilitarian, which is inconsistent with the Confucian emphasis on self-cultivation. As Ricci, through the voice of the "Middle Scholar," explained: "The teachings of the sages, though not entirely devoid of intent, are not aimed at outcomes, but rather at virtue. Thus, in promoting goodness, they point to the beauty of virtue rather than to reward; in condemning evil, they speak of its wickedness rather than punishment (Ricci 1964, p. 530)."

In other words, if one employs the promise of reward and fear of punishment to encourage good and deter evil, it amounts to a utilitarian form of moral persuasion—doing good not for its own sake. Accordingly, in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, we encounter expressions such as "correspondence," "serving with reverence," and "veneration of Heaven." Zhu Xi even composed the *Admonition to Revere Heaven*, but rarely do we see any detailed characterization of the object of this "correspondence" or "service"—i.e., Heaven itself—nor discussion of whether it possesses the power to reward good and punish evil. For Song Confucians, "correspondence" was more a form of existential alignment, while "reverence" was a method of self-cultivation— "reverence for internal rectitude, righteousness for external conduct." Yet Ricci cited passages from the *Book of Documents* to demonstrate

that "The teachings of the sages, as recorded in the classics, promote good with rewards and deter evil with punishments (Ricci 1964, p. 530)."

Thus, the fundamental moral difference between Confucianism and Christianity lies in the contrast between self-discipline (autonomy) and external discipline (heteronomy). Self-discipline entails doing good for its own sake, or acting virtuously upon attaining the moral ideal of the *junzi* (noble man); external discipline means doing good for the sake of reward and avoiding evil out of fear of punishment. Though morally pure in theory, self-discipline is difficult to sustain in practice—especially for ordinary people, for whom moral exhortations to do good for its own sake may not be effective. Ricci incisively pointed out: "I have observed that the fundamental ailment of Confucian scholars in your esteemed nation lies here: they speak only of cultivating manifest virtue, unaware that human intentions are easily fatigued and incapable of self-motivation; they also know not how to look up to the Heavenly Lord and pray for the aid of a loving Father—thus those who attain virtue are few indeed (Ricci 1964, p. 592)."

Even before his conversion (1603), Xu Guangqi (徐光启, 1562-1633) had already articulated a theology of reward and punishment in reference to Shangdi: "As I observe the 'Sovereign on High' in the poem 'Huang Yi,' He sits loftily above all people, as if His eyes and ears were suspended beyond the realm of perception; His essence dwells within humans, manifesting awe-inspiring majesty in every ascent and descent. His luminous presence shines everywhere, even when kings roam far and wide; His far-reaching gaze penetrates even the remotest wastelands—none can escape His sight (Xu 2010, p. 79)." Why did Xu Guangqi emphasize Shangdi's function of rewarding good and punishing evil? Because he was deeply dissatisfied with the lack of religiously grounded "external discipline" in Confucianism: "From ancient times, the rewards and punishments of emperors, the judgments of sages, all served to guide people toward good and restrain them from evil, in great detail and precision. But rewards and punishments, and right and wrong, can only reach external conduct, not internal feelings. As Sima Qian observed, when Yan Hui dies young while the bandit Zhi lives long, people begin to doubt whether good and evil are truly recompensed. Thus, the more stringent the laws, the more rampant the deception. For every law enacted, a hundred loopholes arise. The will to govern exists, but the means are lacking (Xu 1965, p. 24)."

In this context, Confucians turned to Buddhism and Daoism for "supplementation," yet "Buddhism has been in China for 1,800 years, and still it has not changed the human heart or social customs (Xu 1965, p. 24)." Catholicism, which promotes external discipline, could "if it truly seeks to

make all people virtuous, then the teachings of those ministers who transmit the Way of Serving Heaven are truly capable of assisting royal governance, complementing Confucianism, and rectifying Buddhism (Xu 1965, p. 25)." This may well have been one of the reasons Xu Guangqi chose to be baptized and join the Church.

Feng Yingjing (冯应京, 1555-1606) accepted Ricci's arguments with remarkable ease: "Who is the Lord of Heaven? Shangdi. It is truly stated, not empty words. In our nation's Six Classics and the Four Books of the sages, it is said: fear Shangdi, assist Shangdi, serve Shangdi, reach Shangdi (Feng 1964, p. 359)." Wang Ruzhun (汪汝淳) likewise believed that what Ricci called the "Lord of Heaven" aligns exactly with "the supreme, impartial, and upright principle of our Confucian Way (Wang 1964, pp. 374-375)." Li Zhizao (李之藻, 1565-1630) concurred: "Formerly, when the Master spoke of self-cultivation, he began with serving one's parents and extended this to understanding Heaven. By the time of Mencius, the idea of preserving and nurturing in service to Heaven was already fully developed. To know Heaven and serve Heaven—this is identical in meaning and perfectly concordant with what the classics record (Li 1964, pp. 351-354)." Zheng Man (郑鄤, 1594-1639) noted that the teachings of the Three Dynasties were all oriented toward serving Heaven. Later Confucians interpreted "Heaven as principle," thereby turning sacrifices to Heaven into sacrifices to principle—an idea he found incompatible with the teachings of the Three Dynasties: "Are we then to say that sacrificing to Heaven is the same as sacrificing to principle? Such talk verges on impiety. Alas! This is why contemporary scholarship no longer resembles the ancient ways (Zheng 2011, p. 117)."

Zheng Man's close friend Wang Zheng (王徵,1571-1644) believed that the God in Catholicism, who administers reward for virtue and punishment for vice, is the same as the one spoken of in Confucian scripture: "This is exactly what our classics refer to when they say, 'Only the Supreme Ruler is not constant: do good, and blessings shall be bestowed; do evil, and calamities shall befall.' The meanings precisely coincide, and through this one may glimpse the overarching principle behind reward and punishment (Wang 2011, p. 121)." After reading *The Seven Victories*, which strongly advocates "to conquer the nature is the Way," Wang Zheng resolved to be baptized and convert. The work *The Seven Victories*, highly esteemed among late Ming literati (such as Xie Wenjian), was in fact a kind of supplement to or reversal of the Confucian tradition of moral cultivation based on self-discipline.

After baptism, Wang Zheng came to a profound realization of the awesome power of the Mandate of Heaven: "Only now do I truly understand

that the Mandate of Heaven exists. Only now do I know that the Mandate of Heaven is indeed unerring. Only now do I grasp the true awe it commands. In the past, when reciting the words of Confucius, 'The gentleman has three things he reveres,' I thought it merely a mental discipline for scholars. Who would have imagined it to be the very heart-method employed for achieving sagehood throughout the ages (Wang 2011, p. 121) ?" In other words, the notion of *Tian* or *Shangdi*, reinterpreted through the religious framework of Catholicism, became the key for Wang Zheng to grasp the meaning of revering the Mandate of Heaven from the standpoint of moral principle: "To truly fear the rewards and punishments of the Lord of Heaven, and to harbor an awareness of divine punishment, this is precisely the real function of revering the Mandate of Heaven (Wang 2011, p. 122)."

For Wang Zheng, if Heaven lacked the capacity to reward and punish in the manner of a personal deity, then there could be no discussion of knowing, serving, or revering Heaven, nor could it serve any real purpose in the cultivation of virtue. Like Matteo Ricci and Xu Guangqi, Wang Zheng attributed the moral collapse of the age to later Confucians' failure to interpret *Tian* in terms of reward and punishment—that is, in religious terms:

> *"Because they do not know that there is a Lord in Heaven, they devise false theories: some claim that Heaven is nothing more than accumulated qi; others say that the cosmos operates spontaneously, by the self-moving mechanism of qi. Since they do not acknowledge a supreme Lord, they also fail to recognize the reality of reward and punishment. Thus, all phenomena of blessings for virtue or retribution for licentiousness, and omens of fortune or disaster, are all attributed to the operations of Heaven, its movements, and the mechanical unfolding of fate. Some even go so far as to say that even Heaven is not free, but everything proceeds from the natural and inevitable unfolding of the Mandate of Heaven, a necessity whose reasons cannot be fathomed. It is as though beyond the blue firmament lies only a formless void, without any ruler or master. It is such theories that have fostered a habit of moral recklessness among people under Heaven and among future generations."* (Wang 2011, p. 122)

Wang Zheng held that the Song Confucians interpreted Heaven through the concept of *qi* or principle, and regarded the Mandate of Heaven as a kind of natural, inevitable law or *Dao* of Heaven. As a result, they denied the capacity of Heaven to reward good and punish evil, which led to a general loss of moral restraint among the people. Although Confucianism does speak of blessings for the virtuous and retribution for the wicked, it does not clarify whether there is a divine being behind this mechanism, rendering it ineffective as a moral teaching. Wang Zheng also believed that advocating goodness without

referencing reward and punishment ultimately fails to guide people toward virtue: "In fact, it causes people to grow lazy in cultivating virtue, and lures them into indulging in all manner of evil (Wang 2011, p. 132)." For, as he argued, "Without hope for reward, how can one be motivated to endure the hardship of cultivating virtue and reject the pleasures of the world? Without fear of harm, how can one shun evil and restrain the self (Wang 2011, p. 132)?"

Thus, for Catholic converts, the expressions such as *duiyue* (confronting and communing with Heaven) and *zhaoshi* (serving reverently) in the Confucian classics were in fact to be understood as acts of revering the Lord of Heaven. Catholic believers began to use *duiyue* interchangeably with "the Lord of Heaven," as seen in Yang Tingyun (杨廷筠, 1562-1627)'s remarks: "People widely offer sacrifices to countless unverified deities, yet fail to maintain full devotion and reverence to the Lord of Heaven—I find this incomprehensible (Yang n. d. a, p. 5)." "To hold such an unfocused and lukewarm attitude—how can one truly *duiyue* the Lord Most High (Yang n. d. b, vol.1, p. 32)?" "At the close of night and rise of dawn, in every morning's prayer and every hour's task, in every moment of social and official duty, one must never cease from *duiyue* (Yang n. d. b, vol. 2, p. 1)." "To venerate the Lord of Heaven and Earth as the fundamental principle is the very essence of the teaching to reverently serve. To love others as oneself is the fulfillment of the work of completing oneself and others (Yang n. d. b, vol. 2, p. 9)." Zhu Zongyuan (朱宗元, 1616-1660?) noted: "The Westerners maintain celibacy all their lives, practice rigorous self-discipline—half their day and night is spent in *duiyue* (Zhu 2014, p. 672)."

Zhu Zongyuan even wrote a special treatise arguing that the ritual of the suburban sacrifice (jiaoshe) was intended for serving Heaven, i.e., honoring the Lord of Heaven, and did not include worship of the earth. Zhu held that the Confucian concept of *duiyue* was a one-directional act, whereas the Catholic notion of *duiyue* was a spiritual communion between human and God: "To cry out sincerely to the Lord is not mere hollow speech—it is an invocation that truly draws down divine favor and protection. Thus, without ever leaving one's home, one's virtue may grow daily, and one's works may benefit others ever more (Zhu n. d., p. 52)." He believed that Catholicism and ancient Confucianism were alike in their emphasis on revering and serving Heaven. For this reason, Zhu Zongyuan saw the worship of the Lord of Heaven as the very fulfillment of revering and serving Heaven, in complete harmony with the teachings of Confucius: "Let us read the works of Confucius and ask: to what object did he command such solemn reverence and service? Toward what did he urge such cautious devotion? To honor the Lord of Heaven is to follow the words and teachings of Confucius. To claim, arrogantly, that Confucianism is

sufficient and has no need of the learning of Heaven—this is not only to betray the Lord of Heaven, but to betray Confucius himself (Zhu 2014, p. 578)."

Xu Guangqi's advocacy of "replacing Buddhism with Confucianism" was a key factor prompting late Ming literati to be baptized. The intrinsic deficiency of Confucianism in terms of "religiosity" led scholar-official converts to see Catholicism as a supplement to, and even fulfillment of, the Confucian tradition. Zhu Zongyuan remarked: "In the Confucian texts, much is still obscure and not fully integrated; only the learning of Heaven elaborates it in detail. Moreover, nowadays people read texts in a confused and haphazard way. Only after accepting the Heavenly teaching can one understand that every sentence in our *Six Classics* and *Four Books* has meaning, every phrase has its key; shallow Confucians truly have not grasped them (Zhu 2014, p. 454)." "Only with this Heavenly doctrine can the method of self-cultivation and the path of returning to one's spiritual origin become truly complete (Zhu 2014, p. 453)."

Zhang Xingyao (张星曜, 1633-1715?)was even more explicit in asserting that Catholicism must surpass Confucianism, precisely because Confucius lacked the authority to reward and punish: "I preserve a heart of reverence and awe, keeping it pure and selfless, such that my actions contain no transgressions. Should I deviate even slightly, I swiftly confess. Constantly communing with the Lord of Heaven, this surpasses those who follow Confucianism and think they can deceive Confucius, who lacks the power to reward or punish. This is one reason why the Heavenly teaching is superior to Confucianism (Zhang n. d., p. 60)." Zhang further argued that the Confucian learning of serving Heaven was incomplete: "Mencius's doctrine of cultivating the mind and nurturing the nature in order to serve Heaven is indeed clear and penetrating. But in the time of Confucius and Mencius, the Lord of Heaven had not yet incarnated, and so the learning of serving Heaven was still obscure and underdeveloped (Zhang n. d., p. 61)." In Zhang's view, because Confucius had no authority to reward or punish, his teachings could not effectively guide people toward good and away from evil, and instead needed to be supplemented by Buddhism and Daoism. Yet Catholicism not only complements Confucianism—it transcends it: "If everyone, in every household, in every day and every thought and every deed, followed only Confucius as the model, then his teachings would not be considered lacking. But can people today actually do so? Can the teachings of Confucius reach every person, household, day, action, and thought (Zhang n. d., p. 26)?" "If the Way of Confucius is already perfect, why must it borrow from Buddhism and Daoism? And if all the people of the world now borrow from them, is it not precisely because they find Confucius's teaching insufficient (Zhang n. d., p. 26)?" For

Zhang Xingyao, the "religiosity" of Catholicism is the essential reason it surpasses Confucianism.

Conclusion and Final Remarks

In the late Ming period, as Catholicism entered China, terms such as *duiyue* (对越), *zhaoshi* (昭事), and *shitian* (事天), which carried a certain religious connotation, were reinterpreted within a monotheistic theological framework.[6] In Chinese-language Catholic texts, we can observe the use of similar terms borrowed from Confucianism, but their meanings had undergone transformation. *Kouduo Richao* records: "Those outside the Church see how we remain silent and reverent during *duiyue*, how we ceaselessly recite thanksgiving prayers, how we tirelessly hurry to the chapel—and they mock us, saying that we are suffering (Li 2002, pp. 415-416)." "Yet to have both heart and deeds purified, to reverently perform *duiyue*, to repent earnestly and reform oneself, to pray for forgiveness in accordance with the rules—this is genuine cultivation and the true path to Heaven (Li 2002, p. 501)." Here, *duiyue* has already become a religious term, markedly different from its original meaning. *Kouduo Richao* further states: "To serve the Lord is just like how a filial child serves his parents (Li 2002, p. 460)." This reflects a reinterpretation of the Confucian idea of "serving Heaven as one serves one's parents." Similarly, the Fujianese Catholic Zhang Geng, upon his conversion, took the religious name *Zhaoshi Sheng* ("The One Who Serves and Illuminates").

In the Catholic *Our Father*, *adveniat* was translated as *linge* (临格, "to draw near in majesty"; rendered today in Protestant usage as *jianglin*, "to descend"), clearly adopting a term from Confucian lexicon while transforming it into a Christian term. The *Confessional Prayers* contain expressions like *yugao* ("to cry out for mercy"), while *Morning Prayers* use phrases such as *huanghuang Shengsan* ("Majestic Holy Trinity").

Beyond Catholicism, early Qing *Hui-Ru* (Muslim Confucians) also engaged in similar hermeneutic efforts. In his *Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu* (*The Authentic Record of the Most Sacred from the Heavenly Land*), Liu Zhi (刘智, 1669-1764) uses *duiyue* and *zhaoshi* to refer to veneration of Allah: "In reverent *duiyue* to the True Lord, one hears the subtle truth firsthand"; "I perform *duiyue* with the Lord"; "Above the nine heavens, I perform *duiyue* to the True Lord"; "The five daily prayers embody the fullest form of *zhaoshi* (Liu 1995, p. 466)." Liu Zhi believed that Islam was continuous with the Confucian reverence for Heaven: "Yao revered the August Heaven; Tang ascended daily with reverent awe; King

[6] For the origin and meaning of the Catholic term "Tianzhu" (Lord of Heaven) in the late Ming, see Ji Jianxun (2019).

Wen served the Lord on High with manifest devotion; Confucius lamented, 'I have sinned against Heaven, and there is no one to pray to.'"[7]

While missionary efforts and Confucian converts grounded their theological articulation in classical sources, post-Ricci missionaries and believers went beyond simply introducing monotheism-they also brought in Christology.[8] The Catholic doctrine of the Trinity became increasingly well known: the so-called "Heaven" in Catholicism had once incarnated and died for the redemption of humanity. Such doctrines became increasingly difficult for the Confucian literati to accept; figures like Jiang Dejing, Huang Zongxi, and Qian Qianyi expressed strong objections.

Catholicism's emphasis on external moral restraint as a means to encourage virtue was also interpreted by the literati as mere pursuit of blessings. Zhu Zongyuan, for example, was once mocked: "A guest derided me, saying that if blessings and misfortunes are distributed by the Lord, why do those who serve Him not all enjoy wealth and prosperity (Zhu n. d., p. 314)?" Likewise, Catholic reinterpretations of *tian* (Heaven) were seen as "blaspheming Heaven" or "mocking Heaven." Critics accused: "Now these foreign heretics sprinkle holy water, apply sacred oil, bear crosses and instruments of punishment, thereby shackling body and soul alike—can this truly be called *serving Heaven* (Huang 2000b, p. 370)?" Opponents sharply perceived the fusion of Confucian *Tian*, *Shangdi*, and Catholic *Tianzhu* (Lord of Heaven), and charged the missionaries with "slandering Heaven": "They misuse the name of serving Heaven or serving the Lord on High to spread their heresies (Chen 2000, p. 401)." "Those foreigners, such as Matteo Ricci, are true impostors and slanderers of the Lord on High, and should indeed be driven out by today's enlightened emperor. Those who, deceived by empty slogans like serving Heaven or serving the Lord on High, fail to discern the reality and follow blindly—how lamentable (Chen 2000, p. 405)!" Another anti-Christian text reads: "They latch onto Confucian expressions like *zhaoshi* and *qinruo*, then indulge in cruelty, deceit, and lust. Chen Shuishi said they are like rats burrowing into our tradition—what an apt metaphor (Huang 2000a, p. 365)!" Huang Zongxi likewise criticized the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as replacing *Heaven* with "human ghosts," thereby "obliterating *Shangdi* entirely." Therefore, he classified the Catholic reinterpretation of *Heaven* as a heresy akin to Buddhism. However, Huang also argued that the anthropomorphic interpretation of *Heaven* did not originate with either Catholicism or Buddhism,

[7] For comparative studies on late Ming and early Qing Muslim Confucians and Christian Confucians, see Jin Gang (Jin 2009).

[8] See works of figurist missionaries such as Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730) and Joseph de Prémare (1666-1736).

but rather had been opened by Confucians themselves: "It was not without precedent among Confucians." Despite rejecting the Christian and Buddhist interpretations of *Heaven*, Huang still maintained that *Tian* had sovereign authority and was not merely a principle (*li*) (Huang 2020, p. 2).

The editors of the *Siku Quanshu* also believed that while Western learning excelled in mathematics, it erred in "exalting the Lord of Heaven to seduce and bewilder people's hearts." They viewed Catholicism as fundamentally incompatible with the Six Classics, stating, "its divergence is profound indeed."[9]

Catholicism reached its zenith during the reign of the Kangxi Emperor, with a symbolic moment occurring in 1671 when the Emperor granted the Church a plaque inscribed with *Jingtian* (Revere Heaven). Missionaries hung this plaque at Catholic churches throughout China. In *Gujin Jingtian Jian*, Joachim Bouvet cited passages from the Emperor's *Lectures on the Classics* to explicate the meaning of *Jingtian*. The Catholic layman Li Zubai likewise affirmed, "The true scholar is one who reveres Heaven." In 1700, amid the Rites Controversy, missionaries submitted a petition to the Kangxi Emperor, declaring that "Revering Heaven" meant "sacrificing to the ruler and source of all things." The Emperor responded with his endorsement: "What is written here is excellent and accords with the Great Way. Reverence for Heaven, serving rulers and parents, and honoring teachers are universal principles—this needs no amendment (Anonymous 2006, p. 363)."

However, as the Rites Controversy intensified, the possibility of "one Heaven, multiple expressions" (*yitian gebiao*) collapsed. The Pope issued a ban on Chinese rites, including the use of Confucian terms like *Shangdi* and *Tian*, while the Kangxi Emperor issued an edict banning Christianity.[10] Thus, the early Qing-era dialogue and synthesis between China and the West, between Confucianism and Christianity, came to an end.[11]

Debates over the religious nature of Confucianism and whether it should be reinterpreted through Christianity continue into modern Neo-Confucian discourse.[12] The rights, wrongs, and implications of such efforts still await

[9] For critiques against missionaries' interpretations of "Heaven" by anti-Christian thinkers, see *Mingchao poxieji*, and also Sun Shangyang (1994, pp. 248-256).

[10] Later missionaries such as Jean-François Foucquet still interpreted "Heaven" as the "Lord of Heaven" and viewed Emperor Yongzheng's sacrifice to Heaven as worship of the Lord, but due to the Rites Controversy and prohibition of Christianity, dialogue between Jesuits and Confucians ceased.

[11] The localization of Catholicism during the late Qing and Republican periods by the new Jesuits in China continued the trend of "one Heaven, multiple interpretations," even influencing today's efforts at Sinicizing Christianity.

[12] For example, the Boston Confucians. See John H. Berthrong (1994).

deeper investigation. Yet the notion of *yitian gebiao* from the late Ming and early Qing provides meaningful insight for today's discussions on the Sinicization of Christianity and cross-civilizational exchange. The most crucial aspect of Christian Sinicization lies in the localization and Sinification of its core theological concepts. *Yitian gebiao* implies that Sinicization should engage with the highest categories within Chinese culture and reinterpret them in Christian terms. This path may yield better outcomes.

As for civilizational exchange, first, *yitian gebiao* provides a hermeneutical method: namely, seeking commonality within each side's canonical and interpretive traditions. For late Ming and Qing Confucians, *Tian* is the *Heaven* or *Shangdi* found in the Four Books and Five Classics; for Christianity, *Tian* is *Tianzhu*, *Deus*. Second, *yitian gebiao* illustrates that mutual understanding requires not only the pursuit of common ground but also the preservation of difference. Though both sides regard *Tian* as the supreme category, their interpretations diverge. Therefore, differences between civilizations, rather than being causes of conflict, should serve as the foundation for dialogue, exchange, and synthesis.

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