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The Christian interpretations on the nature of heaven's mandate in late Ming and early Qing dynasties

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This paper aims to examine in detail the Christian interpretations on the Confucian concept of the nature of the heaven's mandate [天命之性] during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties from historical and textual perspective. Neo-Confucians of the Song Dynasty interpret the nature of the heaven's mandate as human nature, believing that heaven endowed humans with reason, known as the heavenly principle [天理]. In the late Ming period, Christian missionaries such as Jesuits in China used Confucian classics to convey Christian thoughts, interpreting the heaven's mandate as God's mandate and the nature of the heaven's mandate as the spirituality bestowed by God, which is equated with the soul. They also used the nature of the heaven's mandate as a criterion for determining the authenticity of a teaching (religion[教]), asserting that Christianity is the true teaching (religion). Thus, Christianity in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties provides a new interpretation on the nature of the heaven's mandate and promotes the integration of Christian and Confucian thoughts through this interpretation.

Contribution: The paper provides a detailed review of the history of Christian interpretations on the nature of the heaven's mandate during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Currently, there is limited scholarly research on the theological thoughts of Christianity during this period. This study not only enhances the understanding of the new interpretations by Christianity but also aids in comprehending the theological ideas of Christianity during the late Ming and early Qing periods. By reinterpreting Confucian classics, Christianity endowed them with new meanings, offering valuable references for the localisation of Christian theology and the study of cross-cultural exchange.

Keywords: mandate of heaven; nature of the heaven's mandate; interpretation; Christianity; late Ming and early Qing.

Introduction

The heaven's mandate [天命] is one of the core issues and terms in Confucian thoughts (Ames 2021:124–128). However, there are differing interpretations on the heaven's mandate and the nature of the heaven's mandate [天命之性]. In the pre-Qin period, heaven has certain anthropomorphic characteristics. During the Song Dynasty, Neo-Confucians reinterpret heaven as principle [理], turning the anthropomorphic heaven and its mandate into laws and rules. In the late Ming period, Christian missionaries entered China and began using Confucian classics to disseminate Western Christian doctrines and ideas, offering new interpretations on the heaven's mandate and the nature of the heaven's mandate. They considered heaven [天] to be God, and the nature of the heaven's mandate to be the nature bestowed by God. This human nature, according to Christianity, is not the principle [理], or mind [心] as described by Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, but rather spirituality [灵性], that is, the soul. Christianity also uses the nature of the heaven's mandate as a criterion for determining the authenticity of a teaching (religion [教]), distinguishing Christianity from Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, and asserting that Christianity is the true teaching (religion) because it is divinely ordained, while other religions are created by humans.

Currently, there is limited scholarly research on the interpretation of the nature of the heaven's mandate by Christianity in the late Ming and early Qing periods (Meynard 2014b:67–78; Mungello 1989; Rule 1986). This paper aims to systematically review the history of Christian interpretations on the nature of the heaven's mandate during this time, based on relevant literature. Firstly, the paper analyses the understanding of the nature of the heaven's mandate by Neo-Confucians of the Song Dynasty, particularly Zhu Xi (1130–1200). Secondly, it meticulously examines the interpretations of the nature of the heaven's mandate by Christian missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing

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periods. It thereafter analyses the understanding of the nature of the heaven's mandate by Chinese scholar-officials who were believers. Finally, it discusses the reactions of Chinese scholar-officials and anti-Christian figures to the Christian interpretation on the nature of the heaven's mandate, and examines how missionaries translated the concept of the nature of the heaven's mandate.

This paper argues that the openness of classical texts allows for various interpretations. The late Ming Christian interpretation of the nature of the heaven's mandate demonstrates a hermeneutic path for the localisation of Christianity, by combining Christian theological thought with classical texts and imbuing them with new meanings, thus achieving the localisation and integration of Christian thought. However, the interpretation of classical texts needs to be grounded in tradition. The Christian interpretation of the nature of the heaven's mandate diverges from the Neo-Confucian interpretation of the Song Dynasty, which leads to dissatisfaction and criticism from Confucian scholar-officials and has a certain negative impact on the spread of Christianity in China.

Interpretations on the nature of heaven's mandate by Neo-Confucians in the Song dynasty

The concept of 'the nature of the heaven's mandate' originates from the *Doctrine of the Mean* [中庸]: 'The mandate of heaven is called nature [性]; following this nature is called the Dao [道]; cultivating the Dao is called teaching [教]'. This term of the heaven's mandate has been highly esteemed by later Confucian scholars, especially Neo-Confucians of the Song Dynasty.

Zhu Xi, the prominent Neo-Confucian philosopher of Song Dynasty, provides a detailed explanation of 'the nature of the heaven's mandate':

> Mandate [命] means command. Nature [性] is principle [理]. heaven uses yin [阴] and yang [阳] and the five elements [五行] to transform and generate all things. Qi [气] forms shapes, and principle is also endowed within them, akin to a command. Thus, when living things are born, each receives its endowed principle, which becomes the virtues of the five constant virtues (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith), known as nature. (Zhu 2002:31)

It is clear that Zhu Xi believes humans are composed of two parts: the physical body and the mind. The former is formed by qi, while the latter is endowed by heaven. Therefore, 'the nature of the heaven's mandate' refers to the principle [理] that humans possess, which is endowed by heaven. Since nature [性] is principle, Zhu Xi explains the relationship between human nature and heaven from a metaphysical perspective, addressing the important proposition of why human nature is inherently good.

Moreover, since principle is universal, Zhu Xi believes that the nature of the heaven's mandate means that heaven endows principle to both humans and things, implying that everything possesses a Taiji [太极]. Zhu Xi considers that the goodness of human nature described by 'the nature of the heaven's mandate' is more universal than Mencius's notion of the inherent goodness of human nature. It can be observed that Xi's concept of the nature of the heaven's mandate actually refers to the heavenly principle [天理], which denotes people's rationality that could be capable of recognising and applying moral or ethical principles and is unrelated to supernatural deities.

Zhang Juzheng (1525–1582) in late Ming period provides a detailed explanation of the heaven's mandate's nature which has a significant impact on Jesuits. Zhang Juzheng believes that the nature of heaven's mandate means that heaven, in creating humans, must not only provide qi [气] to form their bodies but also endow them with principle to form their nature. Zhang Juzheng also points out: 'Teaching refines the Dao, the Dao follows nature, and nature is mandated by heaven. This shows that the great origin of the Dao comes from heaven (Zhang 2010:21)'. Based on Zhu Xi's explanation, Zhang Juzheng emphasises heaven's role in morality, asserting that heaven bestows morality upon humans, and humans need to heed the mandate of heaven. Zhang places greater emphasis on the role of 'heaven', whereas Zhu stresses that individuals should return to their own nature.

In summary, the concept of 'the nature of heaven's mandate' discussed in Confucian literature since the pre-Qin period has different meanings. During the pre-Qin, Han and Tang periods, Confucians often view the heaven's mandate as the will or command of heaven, thus attributing certain anthropomorphic characteristics to heaven or the heaven's mandate. Neo-Confucian scholars of the Song and Ming dynasties, especially Zhu Xi, equate the heaven's mandate with the principle of heaven [天理], seeing heaven as principle itself, with weaker religious connotations.

Since *the Doctrine of the Mean* links the heaven's mandate to human nature, there has been considerable discussion on this topic within Confucianism. Confucian philosophers such as the Cheng brothers, Zhang Zai and Zhu Xi all believe that the heaven's mandate refers to the nature of heaven and earth, while Wang Yangming equated the heaven's mandate with human innate knowledge [良知].

The interpretation of the heaven's mandate involves three aspects: heaven, mandate and nature. Pre-Qin literature regards it as the nature bestowed by heaven. Zhu Xi believes that heaven endows humans with principle (specifically benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faithfulness) and that it endows not only human nature but also the nature of all things.

It can be observed that the religious connotations associated with the heaven's mandate in the pre-Qin period had disappeared in Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty. However, the missionaries who came to China in the late Ming dynasty sought to restore the religious significance of the concept.

New interpretations on the nature of heaven's mandate by missionaries

Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) is the pioneer of the accommodation policy of Christianity in the late Ming dynasty (Mungello 1989:44). Ricci attempts to integrate Christianity with Confucianism, adopting a more flexible and sympathetic approach to missionary work (Mungello 1989:49). He highly praises Confucius and ancient Confucianism but severely criticises Neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties, particularly core concepts such as 'li' [principle] and 'taiji' [the ultimate]. Ricci's hermeneutic approach involves returning to the pre-Qin Confucian classics and reinterpreting them through the lens of Christianity, thereby giving them new meaning. Ricci points out that the ancient Confucian classics indeed had monotheistic characteristics. In his representative work *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* [天主实义], Ricci directly equates heaven and Shangdi [上帝] with God (Deus [陡斯] or the Lord of Heaven [天主]), stating 'Our country's Lord of Heaven is what in Chinese is called Shangdi' (Ricci 1965:415) and 'Shangdi and the Lord of Heaven are merely different in name' (Ricci 1965:416). It is called Confucian monotheism by scholars (Zürcher 1995:143). Ricci believes that the heaven in ancient Confucian classics does not refer to the sky, but was a surrogate for the Lord above the heaven, namely the Lord of Heaven. Thus, Ricci interprets 'the mandate of heaven' in the pre-Qin classics, especially *the Book of Historical Documents* [尚书], as 'the mandate of the Lord of Heaven'. Of course, Ricci also opposes the popular notion of fatalism, asserting that everything in the universe is determined by the Lord of Heaven, and that 'apart from the mandates of the Lord of Heaven, there are no other mandates' (Ricci 1965:550).

Regarding 'the nature of heaven's mandate', Matteo Ricci understands it as the nature bestowed upon humans by God. However, Ricci's view on human nature differs from that of Confucianism. According to Western philosophy, Ricci believes that 'nature' refers to 'the essence of each category of things' (Ricci 1965:563), meaning the essential qualities that distinguish different entities. Therefore, the so-called human nature is the essence that distinguishes humans from animals. From this perspective, it is not appropriate to describe human nature as good or evil, because goodness or evil is not the essence that differentiates humans from animals.

Matteo Ricci believes that human nature is the 'ability to reason' (Ricci 1965:564). He argues that goodness, evil, benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faithfulness are not part of human nature, as these are moral attributes that arise 'after reasoning'. Nevertheless, to align with Confucianism, Ricci asserts that human nature (namely the ability to reason which is bestowed by God) is good. Since the ability to reason, bestowed by God, is desirable and lovable, and since Ricci defines goodness as that which is desirable and lovable, he concludes that human nature is inherently good from this perspective.

It can be observed that Matteo Ricci's interpretation of 'the nature of heaven's mandate' differs significantly from that of traditional Confucianism. The Confucian understanding mainly focusses on the ethical and moral aspects, attributing humans' ability to perform good deeds or engage in moral behaviour to innate qualities that are inborn. Moreover, the goodness in humans is not only a potential but also an intrinsic attribute, meaning it does not require external sources but can be found within oneself. This affirms the positivity and initiative of humans in moral actions, as expressed by Zhu Xi's idea of 'seeking within oneself to find it'. The Confucian view of human nature is centred on humans themselves, which is clearly different from the God-centred perspective of Christianity.

For Matteo Ricci, the nature of the mandate of heaven refers to the reasoning ability given to humans by God, but more importantly, it pertains to the choices made after acquiring this reasoning ability. Because different choices from free will determine the goodness or evil of a person's actions, they lead to different consequences, thus to God's rewards or punishments. According to the Confucian understanding of human nature, this would obscure the role of God in judging moral behaviour. Therefore, Ricci emphasises the cultivation of goodness through learning and practice rather than the innate nature of the mandate of heaven.

To accommodate the Confucian theory of the inherent goodness of human nature, or perhaps because he believes it is irrefutable, Matteo Ricci categorises human goodness into two types: inherent goodness [良善] and virtuous goodness [习善] (Meynard 2014a:185). He also distinguishes human nature into two states: before the fall (namely the first ancestor's sin) and after the fall. Before the fall, human nature was inherently good, while after the fall, it became inherently evil.

According to Matteo Ricci's explanation, the nature of heaven's mandate actually refers to the soul bestowed upon humans by the Lord of Heaven, as only the soul possesses the capacity for reasoning. In discussions with late Ming scholars about the goodness or evil of human nature, Ricci, like other Confucian scholars, acknowledges that the nature of heaven's mandate, that is, the nature given by God (namely reasoning ability or the soul), is 'lovable and desirable', and therefore inherently good. In contrast to the nature of heaven's mandate is the nature of temperament [气质], which Song-Ming Neo-Confucianists consider the reason of evil. Ricci, however, attributes the cause of good and evil in humans to emotions [情], which he equated with 'free will'. Thus, despite his criticism of the Neo-Confucianism, Ricci seems to adopt their argumentative approach when discussing human nature. He believes that if human 'reason' (equivalent to the Neo-Confucian 'heavenly principle') functions normally, then emotions (equivalent to the Neo-Confucian 'human desires') would be guided by reason, leading to good behaviour; otherwise, it would lead to evil. This view is similar to Zhu Xi's concept of 'preserving heavenly principle and eliminating human desires [存天理,灭人欲] (Zhang 2005:138)'.

However, there is a fundamental difference between Christianity and Neo-Confucianism, which Matteo Ricci clearly points out, namely the concept of 'the sickness of nature and emotions [性情之病]'. The Song-Ming Neo-Confucianists would not consider the nature of heaven's mandate as 'sick', whereas Ricci's concept of 'the sickness of nature and emotions' refers to the influence of original sin, which deprives humans of the ability to do good. Nonetheless, unlike Protestant Reformers, Jesuit missionaries still believe in the capacity of human reason and in achieving merits through specific actions such as confession (penitence).

Therefore, Matteo Ricci's interpretation of the nature of heaven's mandate can be divided into two levels. On the ontological level, because Ricci equates Heaven with Deus, the nature of heaven's mandate refers to the nature bestowed by Deus, and similar to the Song-Ming Neo-Confucianists, he believes the nature of heaven's mandate is good. On the functional level, Ricci believes that both human nature and emotions could be 'sick' because of the influence of original sin, rendering humans incapable of doing good, thus requiring God's grace (Zhang 2005:141). Ricci emphasises the functional aspect of human nature to a greater extent, as good and evil ultimately stem from human free will rather than human nature itself. Hence, Ricci's view of human nature can be seen as a synthesis of the doctrines of innate goodness and original sin. His discussion of the nature of heaven's mandate serves to support his discourse on moral cultivation.

Giulio Aleni (1582–1649), known as the 'Confucius from the West', was the most famous missionary after Matteo Ricci. Aleni engages in deep dialogues and exchanges with late Ming Confucian scholars on the issue of human nature. Aleni believes that the heart, body, nature and life of humans are all bestowed by God, who also 'dominates and nurtures' them (Aleni 1966:438). Aleni proposes using 'benyuan' (origin[本原]) as the standard for determining whether a teaching (religion) is true. Both Christianity and Confucianism consider heaven as their origin, while Buddhism does not. According to Aleni's explanation, Christianity provides detailed explanations about the origin and destiny of humans (Aleni 1966:456–457).

Giulio Aleni states that 'the Lord of Heaven necessarily imparts the soul and commands adherence to righteousness, without betraying the initial intention of the endowment', meaning that God endows humans with a soul, which possesses reasoning ability, and instructs them to follow righteousness so that they can perform good deeds and accumulate merits, ultimately receiving rewards of heaven after death. This illustrates Aleni's understanding of the nature of the mandate of heaven. Aleni equates the mandate of heaven with the soul, viewing the soul as neither identical to nor a part of the Creator, nor born from parents or from within, but as something that can only be bestowed by the Creator (Aleni 2013:256).

Confucian scholar Ye Xianggao (1559–1627) asks Giulio Aleni: Since everything in the world is governed by God, does this mean that the good and the evil are also caused by God? (Aleni 1966:445). Aleni believes that the nature of heaven's mandate, or the nature bestowed by God, is inherently good, and that human evil comes from humans themselves, namely by disobeying God's commands. In this specific context, Aleni refers to 'God's commands' as natural law and the Ten Commandments. Therefore, to some extent, the nature of heaven's mandate essentially equates to natural law. Aleni argues that the nature of heaven's mandate is inherently good, meaning that God endowed humans with reason to distinguish between good and evil and with desires to seek benefits and avoid harm. Thus, like Matteo Ricci, Aleni believes that the nature of heaven's mandate is good, and that moral goodness or evil in humans arises from free will.

Giulio Aleni further points out that human evil originates from three sources: firstly, original sin, which corrupts human nature; secondly, the physical body; and thirdly, worldly customs. This explanation is similar to the Catholic concept of the 'three enemies' (the worldly customs, the flesh and the devil).

Giulio Aleni also notes that although the nature of heaven's mandate is good, it does not mean that humans are necessarily good. He states that while God is omnipotent and could ensure that humans only do good and never evil, if God did so, the merit for good deeds would belong to God, not to humans. Just as fire and sunlight naturally emit heat and light, and this is not considered their merit, the same applies to humans (Aleni 1966:461).

Giulio Aleni believes that the nature of heaven's mandate is equal among all people, meaning that both emperors and commoners possess the same 'the nature of heaven's mandate'. This idea is similar to the Neo-Confucian concept of the equality of the 'Mandate of Heaven' or 'the nature of Heaven and Earth [天地之性]'. However, Aleni's idea of equality refers to the equality of the soul, indicating that the rational capacity of the soul is equal in everyone, 'regardless of sage or fool, hero or commoner (Aleni 1966:472)'.

Why then are there differences between the wise and the foolish? According to Neo-Confucian understanding, this is because of the 'nature of temperament [气质之性]'. Aleni explains the relationship between lingxing ([灵性] namely soul) and qizhi ([气质] temperament) using the relationship between reason and the body. Aleni believes that reason could dominate the body and thus 'change the temperament' [变化气质].

Ye Xianggao questions, since the nature of heaven's mandate is inherently good, but humans disobey it to do evil, why does God not destroy all evil humans to preserve the good ones? Aleni responds that all humans are sinful, and if God were to destroy the evil, no one would escape punishment. God is also wholly good, wishing for humans to repent and return to their original nature (Aleni 1966:464).

In *The True Origin of All Things* [万物真原], Giulio Aleni provides a more detailed explanation of the mandate of heaven. For Aleni, the mandate of heaven is equivalent to God's command or the Creator's command, which in essence corresponds to the 'word of God' as mentioned in the Old Testament (Aleni 1996:173).

Unlike the traditional Confucian understanding of 'mandate', which pertains to the concept of continuous creation ('shengsheng' [生生]) (Huang 2024), Giulio Aleni's interpretation of 'mandate' refers to creation *ex nihilo* [from nothing]. The Christian notion of 'mandate' is highly purposeful, whereas the Confucian concept of the mandate of heaven lacks purposefulness and merely denotes the origin of human nature (Aleni 1996:175).

Therefore, Giulio Aleni believes that the purpose of the mandate of heaven is entirely for humans: 'heaven and earth and all things are created by God for humans', and people need to 'return to the mandate' in order to 'eternally enjoy boundless true happiness' (Aleni 1996:213).

The Franciscan missionary Antonio de Caballero (1602–1669) has an interpretation of the mandate of heaven similar to that of Matteo Ricci and others. Caballero believes that in the phrase 'the nature of heaven mandate', heaven does not refer to the physical sky but to the invisible God. The term 'nature' refers to the essence of things, and the mandate of heaven means that God 'creates all things and endows each with its inherent nature' (Caballero:3b–4a). In other words, the mandate of heaven refers to God giving souls to plants, animals and humans: living souls [生魂] to plants, sensory souls [觉魂] to animals, and rational souls [灵魂] to humans.

Antonio de Caballero's interpretation builds upon Zhu Xi's commentary. Zhu Xi believes that the mandate of heaven referred to 'the becoming of things, each obtaining its endowed principle'. Caballero, however, categorises things into humans, animals and plants, with the 'principle' referring to the soul. Unlike Zhu Xi, who saw principle as universal, Caballero's concept of the soul had functional differences. Thus, while Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism proposes the idea of the unity of all things, Christianity clearly opposes this notion.

In addition to interpreting the nature of heaven's mandate as the soul, missionaries also equate it with the period of the xingjiao ([性教] teaching of nature). The missionaries divide human history into three stages: the period of xingjiao, the period of shujiao [书教], and the period of chongjiao [宠教], corresponding to the early stage of human history, the period of the Ten Commandments, and the period of Jesus Christ's incarnation respectively. Missionaries such as Giulio Aleni and Jean Monteiro (1603–1648) believe that the nature of heaven's mandate refers to the period of xingjiao in Catholic teaching, a time when human nature had not yet fallen (Monteiao:27a).

According to Jean Monteiao's understanding, the teaching of the nature refers to the innate reverence for the Creator and the adherence to heavenly principles. This reverence and adherence arise naturally from the human heart and are inscribed by God in human nature (Monteiao:26b). Monteiao equates pre-Qin Confucianism with the teaching of the nature because of the tradition of Ricci and others who believe in the compatibility of ancient Confucianism and Christianity. They hold that ancient Chinese Confucians, under the light of nature, recognised partial truths.

However, the teaching of the nature indicates that ancient Chinese people understood human nature as endowed by the mandate of heaven but still had shortcomings (Monteiao:27a). Only with God's incarnation and the establishment of the new teaching are these shortcomings addressed. Therefore, Monteiao believes that Christianity could complement the deficiencies of Confucianism:

> Since the Lord of Heaven became human, establishes scriptures and sacrifices, forgave sins, and offers sacraments, people can escape hell and ascend to heaven. Thus, the new teaching of the Lord of Heaven is meant to make up for what Confucianism lacks. (Monteiao:27a)

From this, it is evident that after Matteo Ricci, missionaries use Christian monotheism to reinterpret the concept of the nature of the heaven's mandate. The missionaries equate heaven with the Lord of Heaven (Deus), the mandate of heaven with God's command, and the nature of the heaven's mandate with the nature endowed by God, which they understand as spirituality, equating it with the soul. To align with the Confucian theory of the inherent goodness of human nature, missionaries view the nature of the heaven's mandate as the human nature before the fall of the first ancestor, representing the initial stage of humans, or the period of the teaching of nature. According to the new interpretation by Christian missionaries, the nature of the heaven's mandate is thus imbued with religious characteristics.

Confucian Christians' understanding of the nature of the heaven's mandate

Although the Confucian Christians of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties were influenced by the missionaries' interpretation on the nature of heaven's mandate, there were distinctions. Yang Tingyun (1557–1627) was a notable Confucian Christian during the late Ming period. In his work *Treatises on Resolving Doubts* (Daiyi pian [代疑篇]), Yang Tingyun provides a detailed explanation of 'the nature of heaven's mandate'. Yang Tingyun first cites Cheng Yi's statement: 'It is indescribable beyond the human nature'. He notes that later Confucian scholars (namely the Neo-Confucians), following this idea, only discuss matters of cultivating the Dao below the level of human nature and do not delve into the subtle intricacies of the mandate of heaven (Yang:16). Yang Tingyun cites Cheng Yi to demonstrate that

Christianity can address what Confucianism has left unexplored. He believes that later Confucian scholars (of the Song and Ming dynasties) only discuss acquired nature, leaving innate nature unaddressed.

Yang Tingyun believes that 'the nature of heaven's mandate' means that human nature is endowed by heaven, saying 'humans have nature bestowed by heaven, just as officials have duties granted by the court (Yang:16a–b).' He argues that the nature of all people is given by God. Yang Tingyun criticises the Neo-Confucian interpretation from the Song dynasty, stating:

> Later Confucian scholars could not understand it, yet they force an interpretation, claiming that mandate is the same as nature and heaven is the same as humans. They believe that what is sublime and continuous, in heaven is called mandate and in humans is called nature, is one entity with two names. They also claim that the creative force [气] of the universe is divided among individuals, each having a share of this creative force, calling it the taiji (great ultimate [太极]) for each thing. They further assert that the creative force is in one's own hands, only concerning the heaven within oneself and not necessarily the heaven above. (Yang:16b)

Yang Tingyun opposes the Neo-Confucian idea from the Song and Ming dynasties that equate mandate with nature and heaven with humans, arguing that heaven and humans, as well as mandate and nature, should not be considered identical.

The reason for this is that Yang Tingyun believes that in the phrase 'the mandate of heaven is called nature', 'heaven' refers to the Lord of Heaven and 'nature' refers to anima , or the soul, which 'does not originate from within nor enter from without, but is indeed created and given by the Lord of Heaven (Yang:17a)'. Yang Tingyun believes that 'the mandate of heaven is called nature' indicates that human spirituality is solely endowed by God, and therefore, it is neither dispersed nor annihilated.

The discussion of the nature of heaven's mandate involves the issue of the goodness or evil of human nature. Yang Tingyun believes that human nature is inherently good because it is 'given to us by God, and we inherently possess it. The Scriptures calls it 'illustrious virtue [明德]', and Confucians call it innate knowledge [良知]'. The terms 'illustrious virtue' and 'innate knowledge' used by Yang Tingyun are common concepts in Neo-Confucianism. Scholars such as Zhu Xi and Cheng Hao believe that illustrious virtue and innate knowledge come from heaven. At least on the surface, Yang Tingyun's discussion of the nature of heaven's mandate aligns with Neo-Confucianism (Standaert 1988:144).

As Professor Nicolas Standaert points out, Yang Tingyun almost neglects the theme of original sin. Unlike Matteo Ricci, Yang Tingyun does not distinguish between human nature before and after the Fall. Additionally, Yang Tingyun differs from Ricci in that he does not believe benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom [仁义礼智] are derived from reasoning, but rather regard them as inherent in human nature (Standaert 1988:144).

It can be seen that Yang Tingyun does not equate the nature of heaven's mandate with the soul, nor does he discuss the goodness or evil of human nature by referencing the soul's functions as Ricci does. Yang Tingyun's understanding of the nature of heaven's mandate is still influenced by Neo-Confucianism. However, he is influenced by missionaries when interpreting Heaven as God. Therefore, the characteristic of 'synthesis' in Yang Tingyun's thought is exceptionally evident, which is why Prof. Standaert refers to him as a Confucian and Christian.

Another notable Confucian Christian during the late Ming period was Han Lin (1598–1649). Han Lin believes that 'what is called conscience and principle of heaven is originally the mandate of the Lord, engraved in the human heart, and must be known' (Han & Zhang:6a). Han Lin's explanation actually merges the ideas of Zhu Xi and Matteo Ricci, equating the nature of the mandate of heaven with the principle of heaven. Han Lin argues that obeying the principle of heaven is obeying the Lord's will, otherwise, it is violating the Lord's command.

Han Lin also equates the teaching of the heart (the teaching of conscience and principle of heaven) with the teaching of the nature. Confucianism, which follows the nature of the mandate, has things it does not know and cannot do because the qi (气) endowed by human is inherently biased. However, Christianity is a teaching established by the Lord himself and thus has supernatural foundations and holy deeds beyond natural capabilities.

In other words, Han Lin believes that while Confucianism, based on the nature of the mandate of heaven, focusses on self-discipline and self-cultivation from within, it falls short because of human bias. Christianity, with its supernatural Lord of Heaven, can compensate for the deficiencies of self-discipline. Han Lin argues that the nature of the heaven's mandate makes Confucianism focus only on self-discipline, whereas Christianity emphasises external discipline, which is the fundamental difference between the two.

Han Lin also points out that to determine whether a teaching (religion) is true, one must see whether it originates from 'upright human nature (Duan & Han:1a)'. Han Lin notes that ancient sages have always said that nature is fundamentally the mandate of heaven, known as 'the divine mandate is called nature', indicating that human nature is created by heaven (the Lord of Heaven). Therefore, only the creator of nature can establish the true teaching of nature. Since nature is created by the Lord of Heaven, the teaching established by the Lord himself is the true teaching. Only the creator of nature can explain the origin of nature, the reasons for its deviations, and how to correct those deviations (Duan & Han:4b).

It is evident that Han Lin very flexibly applied the concept of 'the heaven's mandate is called nature', equating heaven with the Lord of Heaven, and using this as the standard for determining the true teaching (religion).

In the *Book of Admonitions* [铎书], Han Lin directly states: '*The Doctrine of the Mean* says:

> 'The mandate of heaven is called nature; following nature is called the Dao; cultivating the Dao is called teaching'. This means that human ethics are based on nature of heaven, and there is no other concept of the Dao and teaching beyond this. To speak of the Dao and teaching outside of this is heresy and false doctrine. (Han 1996:630)

On the surface, Han Lin appears to be using the Confucian concept of the nature of the heaven's mandate as the standard for the Dao and teaching. Considering Han Lin's previous thoughts, the 'Dao and teaching' here likely refers to Christianity.

Zhu Zongyuan (1616–1660)[1] was a Confucian Christian in the early Qing period. While still in his twenties, Zhu Zongyuan wrote numerous works in Chinese, which brought him recognition. In determining what is the true teaching (religion), Zhu Zongyuan cites the concept of the nature of heaven's mandate, believing that only teachings based on heaven are true teachings. He states:

> Teaching is the cultivation of the Dao. The Dao follows nature and originates from heaven. Therefore, the sages established teachings precisely to guide people in cultivating their inherent nature, returning to the original state of the mandate of heaven. Hence, there is no teaching that does not originate from heaven (Zhu a:1a).

Furthermore, Zhu Zongyuan believes that the concept of the nature of heaven's mandate indicates that heaven is the Lord of Heaven. He quotes:

> *The Book of Historical Documents* says: 'The supreme emperor has conferred (even) on the inferior people a moral sense, compliance with which would show their nature invariably right'. This aligns with the saying that the mandate of heaven is called nature. *The Classic of Filial Piety* [孝经] also mentions heaven and the sovereign emperor together. If we regard the sovereign emperor as heaven, then it is clear that heaven is not the visible sky but the invisible ruler. (Zhu a:2a–b)

Similarly, Zhu Zongyuan also believes that the nature of the heaven's mandate refers to the soul, stating, 'There is no duality in essence'; 'Even those who are simple and ignorant possess the potential for wisdom and virtue; even those who are wise and holy have no different endowment by nature (Zhu a:16b)'. The soul is the essence of the heaven's mandate, 'undivided and singular'.

Zhu Zongyuan criticises 'hypocritical Confucians with literati dress'[衣冠伪儒] for not understanding the principle of nature and mandate, meaning they did not recognise that human nature is endowed by the Lord. As a result, they have no sense of reverence, deceive the ruler and the people, indulge in desires, and act selfishly and recklessly (Zhu a:10a).

Similar to Matteo Ricci, Zhu Zongyuan believes that the nature of the heaven's mandate is inherently good, stating that 'Yao [尧] and Shun [舜] are no different from Jie [桀] and Zhi [跖]' (Zhu b:46a). However, this goodness refers to inherent goodness (what Ricci called innate goodness), not moral goodness or practical goodness. Zhu Zongyuan argues that the nature of the heaven's mandate is inherently good, indicating that human nature can inherently embody benevolence. However, one does not become a benevolent person simply because of this potential; rather, one becomes a benevolent person by practising benevolence, a righteous person by practising righteousness, and an unrighteous person by practising unrighteousness. Human nature is capable of goodness, and evil actions are a deviation from this nature and unrelated to it, 'not the fault of nature' (Zhu b:46a).

Zhu Zongyuan equates the concept of the flesh among Christianity's three enemies (the flesh, the world custom and the devil) with one's temperament (the nature of temperament [气质之性]). Zhu Zongyuan believes that although people's temperaments differ, the power to choose good over evil lies within the human heart and is unrelated to one's temperament.

Zhang Xingyao (1632–1715?) was a famous Confucian Christian in Hangzhou during the early Qing period. Zhang Xingyao believes that the 'heaven' in 'the mandate of heaven is called nature' refers to the Lord of Heaven, who can 'endow the nature to the inferior people'. This also indicates that 'the Lord of Heaven or God endows us with spirituality', which is 'the great origin of ourselves'. Zhang Xingyao equates the teaching of Confucius with the teaching of the law [书教], while he considers Christianity to be the teaching of the grace [宠教].

Zhang Xingyao also believes that 'the mandate of heaven is called nature, and following nature is called the Dao' indicating that the Dao follows nature, and therefore both the Dao and nature originate from heaven. Humans cannot create the Dao themselves. In other words, the teaching of cultivating the Dao should be based on heaven. Zhang Xingyao actually uses 'the nature of heaven's mandate' as a standard for determining what is a true teaching (religion), stating that 'upon examining the two schools [*Buddhism and Daoism*], they disregard and abandon heaven, making them thieves to the worldly order, and thus cannot be considered true teachings' (Zhang:46a).

According to this standard, not only are Buddhism and Daoism not true teachings, but even Confucianism as a true teaching is questionable. Although Confucianism speaks of 'the mandate of heaven is called nature', it is still a human-established teaching by figures like Confucius and Mencius. Therefore, for Zhang Xingyao, while ancient Confucianism aligns with Christianity, Christianity complements and surpasses the deficiencies of Confucianism. This is because

1.Assumed that Zhu Zongyuan died around 1660.

Confucianism is a human-established teaching, whereas Christianity is a teaching personally established by the Lord of Heaven, truly fitting the description of 'the mandate of heaven is called nature, following nature is called the Dao, and cultivating the Dao is called teaching'. Zhang Xingyao argues, 'How can a human-established teaching be of the same kind and be compared with the teaching of heaven (Zhang:52a)?'

It can be observed that the interpretation of the mandate of heaven and the nature of the heaven's mandate by Christianity during the Ming and Qing dynasties includes the following aspects:

Firstly, the mandate of heaven is understood as the mandate of the Lord of Heaven, resulting in terms such as the Lord's command [主命], the Creator's command [造物主命], commandments [诫命]. When describing God's creation of all things and Jesus's miracles, missionaries often use 'command' [命] as a verb to highlight the supreme authority of God or Jesus.

Secondly, the nature of the heaven's mandate is interpreted as the Lord of Heaven bestowing a soul or reasoning ability upon humans, making it desirable and good. However, this goodness is not moral goodness, which belongs to acquired behaviour. Therefore, the goodness of the nature of the heaven's mandate is innate goodness, indicating that humans have the potential to do good. Because the soul possesses reasoning ability, the nature of the heaven's mandate or the nature of heaven and earth is directly equated with the soul (or spirituality).

Thirdly, missionaries understand the nature of the heaven's mandate as human nature before the fall of the first ancestor, with fallen human nature being evil, thus proposing the concept of 'the Dao is overcoming one's nature'.

Fourthly, based on the concept of 'the mandate of heaven is called nature', Christianity equates Confucianism with the teaching of the nature [性教], thereby needing the teaching of the grace [宠教] to supplement it. Additionally, Christianity uses the mandate of heaven to distinguish itself from Buddhism, arguing that Buddhism does not recognise the mandate of heaven but usurps heaven, whereas Christianity acknowledges the mandate of heaven, aligning itself with Confucianism.

Fifthly, Christianity also uses the nature of the heaven's mandate as a standard to determine whether a teaching (religion) is true, asserting that Christianity is the true religion because it is commanded by the heaven (namely the Lord of Heaven).

Additional discussion

Some scholar-officials accept the Christian interpretations of the mandate of heaven and the nature of the heaven's mandate. For instance, Li Zhizao believes that the mandate of heaven is the command of the Lord, aligning Matteo Ricci's teachings with those of pre-Qin Confucianism (Li 1965:354).

Shao Fuzhong interprets Confucius's statement that 'one cannot discuss higher matters with those below the middle level' to mean that 'higher matters' referred to heaven, which is not the visible sky but a realm with a sovereign. He states, 'This sovereign creates heaven, which is called the mandate of heaven; this sovereign creates humans, which is called human nature' (Shao 1966:4).

Cao Yubian, in his Preface to *Overcoming Seven Sins* [七克], points out:

> To follow our inherent nature as ordained by heaven and to resist allowing it to drift is something that both China and the West agree upon ... To fully realize one's nature is to transform one's emotions [情]. To transform one's emotions is to follow the supreme God. (Cao 2009:195–196)

Cao Yubian's interpretation of the nature of the heaven's mandate has two layers of meaning.

Firstly, similar to Zhu Xi's interpretation, the nature of the heaven's mandate, which is the nature of heaven and earth, is inherently good. According to Christianity, the seven deadly sins do not arise from one's nature but from one's emotions (namely free will).

Secondly, Cao Yubian borrows from Matteo Ricci's interpretation, agreeing that the nature of the heaven's mandate refers to human rational capabilities, so one's nature can transform one's emotions. Cao Yubian seems to use 'emotions' to explain the source of evil. Therefore, Cao Yubian's view differs from the Neo-Confucian idea that the mind governs both nature and emotions. Cao Yubian appears to combine the Christian view of human nature possessing rational abilities with the Confucian concept of fulfilling one's nature and understanding one's destiny.

However, anti-Christians argue that Christianity 'publicly rejects Buddhism while secretly appropriating it, and falsely respects Confucianism while actually undermining it' (Zhong 1986:142). Zhong Shisheng believes that 'the mandate of heaven is called nature, so everyone can attain their position in the center [of the universe]'. He also believes that the Confucian concept of heaven has three layers of meaning: the azure sky, the heaven that governs the world and rewards good and punishes evil (which is the god, but governs the world rather than creating it), and the innate, luminous nature that is eternal and indestructible, which is called heaven. Zhong Shisheng considers this innate, luminous nature to be the origin of all things in the universe, which is fate, as described in *the Doctrine of the Mean*, where the mandate of heaven is called nature.

Zhong Shisheng believes that Zhu Xi's interpretation of 'the nature of heaven's mandate' is 'very erroneous' because Zhu Xi thought that human nature is bestowed by heaven. Zhong Shisheng argues that what can be bestowed must be a tangible thing, whereas the mind and nature are intangible and cannot be bestowed by external objects. Christianity, on the other hand, holds that human nature is bestowed by God.

Zhong Shisheng considers this understanding incorrect because if the intangible mind and nature are bestowed by God, then God's luminous nature should also be bestowed by something else. If that are the case, God would not be eternal. He argues, 'If something without form can still be bestowed, then God's luminous nature must also have someone to bestow it. If it can be bestowed, it can also be taken away. How then can there be a beginning without an end?'

It can be seen that the difference between Zhong Shisheng and Christianity lies in that Zhong Shisheng believes that the nature of heaven's mandate, or the Supreme Ultimate (Taiji), is internalised within all things and is the origin of all things. Christianity, however, holds that the mandate of heaven refers to the command of the Lord of Heaven, with human nature bestowed by him.

This article thoroughly examines the new interpretation of the mandate of heaven as nature by Christianity during the late Ming and early Qing periods. The Christian interpretation of this concept differed from that of the Song dynasty Neo-Confucians, as it sought to restore its religious characteristics and imbue it with Christian theological thought. This article argues that the vitality of classic texts lies in their openness to different interpretations. The missionaries who came to China in the late Ming period believed that the nature of heaven's mandate is the nature ordained by God, and that this nature is equivalent to the human soul. Since the nature of heaven's mandate comes from the authoritative Four Books, specifically *the Doctrine of the Mean*, Christianity uses it as a standard for determining whether a teaching (religion) is true. They believe that Christianity, being ordained by God, conformed to the mandate of heaven as nature described in *the Doctrine of the Mean*, and thus is the true teaching (religion).

However, any interpretation of classic texts must not deviate from orthodoxy and authority. The Song dynasty Neo-Confucian interpretation of the nature of heaven's mandate is a rational one, whereas Christianity gave it a religious meaning. This leads to significant differences between the Christian and Neo-Confucian interpretations, which in turn provoked dissatisfaction and criticism from the scholar-officials.

Therefore, the analysis in this article shows that the localisation of Christianity needs to make use of indigenous classic texts, but when providing new interpretations, it is important to be mindful of the limits to avoid conflicts of meaning caused by over-interpretation or misunderstanding.

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