
REVISITING JAMES LEGGE'S CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF CONFUCIAN FILIAL PIETY: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

重新审视理雅各对儒家孝道的基督教解读： 一种比较研究的方法

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on James Legge's Christian hermeneutical approach to Confucian filial piety. It firstly investigates various interpretations of Confucian filial piety, and then discusses the manner by which Legge combined the concept of a Christian God with the Confucian doctrine of filial piety through his translation of Confucian classics. This resulted in the alteration of the immediate father figure in Confucian filial piety to the Father in Heaven. A further study of the indigenous concept of *tian* 天 as the divine power and the concept of the Christian Heavenly Father then ensues, leading to a comparison of the moral authorities in Chinese and Western cultures. It argues that Legge's Christian hermeneutic interpretation of filial piety highlights the true value of humanity and humaneness in Confucian moral philosophy.

This paper focuses on James Legge's (1815-1897) Christian hermeneutical approach to Confucian filial piety. Historically, the cultivation of filial piety was a key component in traditional Chinese education. Twenty-four examples of filial piety were incorporated into the elementary education curriculum in late

imperial China, which helped Confucian filial piety permeate down to the roots of Chinese society (Bai, 2005, pp. 108-114). In the twentieth-century however, such examples were criticised as inhumane, as children were required to be subservient to their parents even under trying conditions. One may argue that Confucius actually encouraged a balance between obedience and moral righteousness. In reality, however, it frequently transpired that a father was clearly in the wrong and failed to listen to sound advice. Under these circumstances, should a son still obey his father? There is no direct answer from the twenty-four examples nor in the Confucian classics. Therefore, it is essential for us to revisit the interpretations of Confucian filial piety. This paper discusses the manner by which Legge combined the concept of a Christian God with

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the Confucian doctrine of filial piety through his translation of Confucian classics, resulting in the alteration of the immediate father figure in Confucian filial piety to the Father in Heaven. This then makes all human fathers (including sovereigns) subject to ultimate accountability to a Just and Loving God. The study then examines the indigenous concept of *tian* 天 as the divine power and compares it with the concept of the Christian Heavenly Father. It argues that Legge's Christian hermeneutic interpretation of filial piety clarifies the humane intent of Confucian moral wisdom.

WHAT IS FILIAL PIETY?

Examining the form of the Chinese character *xiao* (孝) may provide a basic explanation of this prime virtue: an old man and underneath, a young man supporting him (Legge, 1976, p. 71). This represents a child who, nurtured

and raised by the parents, is obliged to look after them in their old age and to make sacrificial offerings to them after their death. Theoretically, this is a reciprocal relationship between child and parent, reflecting the Confucian ideal bond between children and parents, which kindles the development of humaneness.

Exemplars of filial piety were first described in Buddhist teachings. A Confucian version of the twenty-four exemplars did not emerge until the Song Dynasty (960-1279), where filial piety was a crucial element of self-cultivation in the teachings of Song dynasty Neo-Confucianism. In the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), this Confucian version was well received through its presentations in folklore, children's primers and other forms of popular literature. Since the majority of the population in pre-modern China was illiterate, these popular assimilations of the twenty-four exemplars of filial piety proved effective in transmitting filial piety from the Confucian classics to the roots of Chinese culture as a whole.¹

This Confucian version of filial piety required a son to give his parents all his personal attention and affection, i.e. to provide spiritual support as well as material provisions. The twenty-four exemplary stories embodied the notion that no matter the age of the son, he was still considered a child for as long as his parents lived.² Furthermore, children in these stories were often presented as an object for sacrifice, such as the well-known story of Guo Ju 郭巨, who was prepared to bury his three-year-old child alive for his mother's sake.³

1 For a survey on the evolution of filial piety and its various interpretations and practice in different historical periods and schools of Chinese thought and philosophy, see Chan & Tan, 2004.

2 For example, the story of *Lao Laizi yuqin* 老萊子娛親 (Lao Laizi entertaining his parents) tells that Lao Laizi of the Zhou dynasty was said to have amused his parents by pretending to be an infant in his late seventies. See Bai, 2005, pp.108-109.

3 It was said that in the Han dynasty, Guo Ju lived in poverty and his mother had to divide her portion of food with his son. Guo feared that his mother did not get enough to eat because of his child, so he decided to bury his son alive. After having dug into the ground, he saw a pot of gold, which was believed to be a treasure from Heaven for the dutiful son. See Bai, 2005, p. 109.

William Gillespie⁴ (1854) noted that filial piety lay at the core of all Confucian virtues and Chinese parents were “regarded almost as gods and superior beings.” Because the emperor was venerated as the father of his people, absolute obedience to his rule united the vast nation of China for centuries. Gillespie considered this practice of filial piety to be both ludicrous and horrifying (Gillespie, 1854, pp. 15-20).

Some seventy years later, Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936), one of the greatest writers in the history of modern Chinese literature, condemned the twenty-four exemplars of filial piety as inhuman and inhumane (Lu, 1973a, pp. 20-26). In *A Madman's Diary*, the very first modern story written in vernacular Chinese, he attacked Confucian tradition, for the sake of “saving the children” (*jiu jiu haizi* 救救孩子) (Lu, 1973b, p. 19).

Long before Gillespie and Lu Xun, Confucian writers had already identified a dilemma with the Confucian concept of filial piety: if parents were unkind and abusive, should a son still show respect to them? The importance of filial piety was clearly stated in Confucian classics: those who accepted filial duty in family life would assume the same responsibility to their social obligations, and those who paid reverence to their parents would show the same affection to their sovereign (*Xiaojing*, 9). Therefore, filial piety in traditional Chinese culture represented “a political virtue, tied to loyalty to political superiors up to the Son of Heaven (the emperor)” (Ebrey, 1993, p. 64). This socio-political import of filial piety provides a context against which we may understand the perspective presented in the stories of the twenty-four exemplars: a dutiful son had to be obedient to his parents even if he was abused. For example, the Sage-king Shun depicted in the classics⁵ complied with his filial obligations to his parents although his father was stupid, his mother perverse and his younger brother conceited (de Bary & Bloom, 2013, p. 30).

4 William Gillespie was a member of the Presbyterian United Secession Church who served briefly in China from 1844-1849 (Standaert & Tiedemann, 2009, p. 153).

5 *The Book of Documents, The Doctrine of the Means* and the *Mencius* all recorded his deeds of filial piety.

Shun, as an example of perfect virtue, was later conveyed from the classics to popular literature and children's primers.⁶

The message through these examples was clear. A child must endure the abusive treatment meted out by his parents. It seems that the only hope for these exploited children was to await a miracle, such as in the case of Guo Ju mentioned earlier, whose son was saved by a pot of gold from Heaven. Song Neo-Confucian scholars noted this dilemma but could not resolve the issue. For example, in Zhu Xi's opinion, the parents of Shun were aberrant. He said that most parents had “the nature of an average person” and their love and hate would not “violate principle,” so sons should obey them (Chan, 1967, p. 181). The question, however, remains: how to prevent such “aberrant parents” from abusing their children?

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A CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS

In one modern interpretation of filial piety the father figure is redefined as a symbol of tradition, and the practice of filial piety thus can be interpreted as respect for tradition rather than unquestioning obedience to one's immediate father (Chan & Tan, 2004, pp. 203-214).

In late-nineteenth-century China “not following one's immediate father” became a key Christian interpretation of Confucian filial piety.

6 Another example of such obedient sons was Min Sun, a disciple of Confucius. His stepmother mistreated him because she had two children of her own. Although Min Sun often suffered from cold and hunger, he stopped his father from divorcing her. He said to his father: ‘If she remains, only one son is cold; if she departs, all sons will be destitute.’ Min Sun's virtue was widely circulated and was even heard of by Confucius, who thus praised him with admiration: ‘Filial indeed is Min Ziqian!’ (*Lunyu*, 11:4).

Christian missionaries merged Christian piety with Confucian wisdom through their translation of Confucian classics and their education programmes. Theologically, edicts from God to human beings proceeded from “God to apostles and prophets, apostles and prophets to other believers, fathers (included in other believers) to children” (Gundry-Volf, 2001, p. 58). The following examples reveal that this notion was accommodated in Legge’s translation of *Xiaojing*.

In Legge’s translation the terms *tian* (‘Heaven’) and *shangdi* 上帝 (the ‘Supreme Ruler’) are “perfectly synonymous” (Legge, 1879, p. 476, ft.2). Since the terms *tian* and *shangdi* can be used synonymously, Legge thus translated the sentence of *fuzi zhi dao, tianxing ye, junchen zhi yi ye* 父子之道，天性也，君臣之義也 as

the relation and duties between father and son, (thus belonging to) the Heaven-conferred nature (contain in them the principle of) righteousness between ruler and subject (Legge, 1879, p. 479).

From a Confucian perspective the sentence may be interpreted as “the bond between the father and son is human nature which can also be applied to the relationship between the ruler and his officials.” Legge incorporated the Christian *tian* – Heaven or Supreme Ruler – into his translation of the Chinese term *tianxing* 天性 signifying “natural propensity.” In this interpretation Legge introduces the Heavenly Father into the Chinese concept of father-son and establishes a higher standard than the earthly father’s authority. Hence the authority of the earthly father is not supreme and ranks below that of the Heavenly Father.

Legge’s interpretation is not entirely new. As early as the seventeenth century, Chinese Catholic believers such as Wang Zheng 王徵 (1571-1644), had already made this point. In his discussion of the relationship between God and one’s own parents he referred to God as *da fumu* 大父母 (Great Parent):

People know that they should serve their parents, but don’t know that the Lord is our Great Parent. People know that the

government is the legitimate ruler but don’t know that our Heavenly God rules the entire Heaven which is the highest sovereignty. One cannot be regarded as a son if he does not serve his parents; one cannot become a government official if he does not know who the legitimate ruler is. By the same token, one cannot be seen as a human being if one does not serve our Heavenly Lord. (Wang, 2011, vol. 8, p. 124)

The Song Neo-Confucian metaphysical system united Man, Heaven, and Earth. For example, Zhang Zai (1020 - 1077) claimed that a man was not just a son of his parents; rather, he was a son of Heaven and Earth (de Bary, Chan & Watson, 1960, p. 497). Extending this relationship to society, the emperor was the eldest son of Heaven and Earth and the ministers were his stewards (Chan, 1967, p. 77). The relationship between father and son and between ruler and minister were “definite principles of the world” and nobody under Heaven could “escape from them” (Chan, 1967, pp. 53-54). Cheng Yi (1033 – 1107) also said that according to the Principle of Nature, one could “develop one’s nature” and fulfil one’s destiny “in the very acts of filial piety and brotherly respect” (Chan, 1967, p. 174). Clearly, these Neo-Confucian scholars considered man the filial son of the universe and filial piety at its purest was “to rejoice in Heaven and to have no anxiety” (Chan, 1967, p. 77). However, Wang Zheng did not treat Heaven or *tian* as just Nature, but as *da fumu* – Great Parent. This then merged Confucian filial piety with Christian teaching, and Legge’s translation reflected this Chinese understanding of *tian* as a personal God.

Indeed, the Chinese often refer to the unknown force in Nature as a moral authority which extended beyond the ruling classes. The well-known phrase *tianwang huihui, shu er bulou* 天網恢恢，疏而不漏⁷ was first described in Chapter 73 of Laozi’s *Dao de jing* 道德經. Legge (1891) translated this phrase as “The meshes of the net of Heaven are large; far apart but letting

7 In the original text of *Dao de jing*, this word 漏 is 失 but both can refer to the meaning of “escape” in this context.

nothing escape” (p. 116). In his note Legge (1891) elaborated: “The chapter teaches that rulers should not be hasty to punish, especially by the infliction of death. Though they may seem to err in leniency, yet Heaven does not allow offenders to escape” (p. 116). In this explanation Heaven or *tian* represents a higher authority than that of the rulers.

THE HERMENEUTICAL CHALLENGE

In *China and the Christian Impact* (1985), Jacques Gernet argues that the Chinese term *tian* can mean both heaven and a physical sky. The former was employed by the early Jesuits to refer to God; the latter can be extended to refer to Nature in general. Indeed, *tian* in Chinese has a much more ambiguous meaning than the word “Heaven” in English. While Gernet’s views have proven to be controversial since its publication

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in the 1980s,⁸ he correctly asserts that the term “heaven” may not convey the precise meaning of the Chinese term *tian*, which is “a concept in which secular and religious aspects merge” (p. 193); whereas “for the Christians the word ‘heaven’ is simply a metaphor to refer to God and his angels, and paradise and its elect” (p. 194). Also, the term *tian* “expresses an order that is both divine and natural, both social and cosmic” (p.194). In the Chinese classics, such as the *Book of Changes*, “Heaven appears not as a way of referring to the personal creator God, but as an anonymous power whose continuous action ensures the alternations and equilibrium of nature” (p. 196).

In his famous study of Chinese science

8 See Rule, 2001, pp. 63-80; and reviews of Gernet’s book, Ching, 1987(1), pp.99-101; Mungello, 1988 (1), pp. 152 – 53; Cohen, 1987, pp. 674 – 583

and civilization, Joseph Needham (1900-1995) observed that the Chinese viewed all beings as parts “in a hierarchy of wholes forming a cosmic pattern and what they obeyed were internal dictates of their own natures” (Needham, 1970, p. 582). This differs significantly from faith in God which is a superior authority external to all beings in the universe.

In folk religions and philosophies people often appeal to *tian* when they are wronged or treated unjustly in the earthly world. Reflected in Chinese literature, this appeal to a Heavenly authority is often presented in “innumerable accounts which saw wrongdoers summoned to the Taoist netherworld or the Buddhist hell” (Inglis, 2006, p. 78). For example, in Hong Mai’s 洪邁 (1123-1202) *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志 (Record of the Listener), one story recounts the spirit of a woman named Xiaohong 小紅, who revealed that she and her sister were both abused by their stepmother and that they committed suicide because they could not bear the mistreatment. Someone asked her why they did not seek revenge for their stepmother’s abuse. Xiaohong replied: “[We] made our complaint to *tian* which had punished her [for us]” (Hong, 1981, vol.2, pp. 522-523). In Chinese literature there are many stories about *tian* or the divine power that punishes those who are unfilial but fewer about the punishments that fell upon those who abused their children. The story of Guo Ju who was about to bury his own child in order to save food for his elderly mother, by modern standards, is inhumane as alleged by Lu Xun. However, the story uses the miracle as a reward for Guo Ju’s filial act. This sends a powerful message that the divine power is perspicacious in rewarding good deeds and rectifying the injustice in the earthly world. Legge’s interpretation of the Confucian father in the doctrine of filial piety corresponds with the native Chinese beliefs; however, it transfers ultimate power to a Heavenly God instead of an impersonal *tian*. In this Christian reinterpretation obedience to one’s father changes to one’s responsibility to God first. This shift challenges the traditional Chinese socio-political order: the ruler first, followed by government officials, father and son.

TOWARD CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

In a note to his translation Legge elaborates on the relationship between filial piety and humanity, believing that Confucian scholars reconciled the statements in the *Classic of Filial Piety* and in other Confucian canons “with their theory as to the constituents of humanity” (Legge, 1879: 466). In this context we may see Legge’s reinterpretation of the father figure in Confucian filial piety as a modern hermeneutical approach to the studies of Confucianism.

McCann (2013) in his study finds a common vision of the human person and society shared by Catholic social teaching (CST) and Confucian moral philosophy, but points to a significant difference: “CST is emphatically theocentric” whereas “Confucianism is anthropocentric, a practical philosophy focused primarily on what human beings might reasonably make of themselves through self-cultivation” (p. 263).

Despite such divergence a sense of common humanity, embodied in the word *ren* 人, denoting people (*Ciyuan*, 1988, p. 85), exists not only in Confucian culture, but also in Christianity and all great traditions. The interpretation of the term *ren* in traditional Chinese philosophy and educational thought was often combined with the key Confucian concept of benevolence or humaneness (*ren* 仁). The two characters share the same pronunciation and the structure of the character for benevolence is formed with the character for people as its radical. In Confucianism benevolence (*ren*) was a key term, referring to the virtues of goodness, humanity and love. It was impossible to become a superior man (*junzi* 君子) without the virtue of benevolence (Tu, 1968, pp. 29–39; 1979, pp. 17–34). Therefore, the term for people in Chinese has the full sense of a rich humanity. Chinese education was originally designed to foster children’s humanity. There might be a parallel here with the connection between the English words human and humane.

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Confucianism as the Chinese civil tradition, as Professor de Bary points out, requires not merely “a return to the Chinese classics and a critical re-engagement with tradition”; more essentially it calls for “an encounter with the seminal works of other major traditions that speak to many of the same perennial issues” (de Bary, 2004, p. 222). From this perspective we appreciate Legge’s modern hermeneutical approach to Confucian filial piety as his interpretation contributes to the “Great Conversation” (de Bary, 2007, p. 24) that encompasses all great Chinese traditions and Christianity and highlights the true value of humanity and humaneness in Confucian moral philosophy.

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