

Sin and Penance in Fujian Christianity in Late Ming Times

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The choice of the subject needs a few words of explanation: why sin and penance, why Fujian 福建, and why the late Ming? Firstly, the theme “sin and penance” as it figures in the title of this paper is an elliptic formula used for the sake of brevity. It actually refers to the whole complex of “guilt – sin – remorse – confession – absolution – penance”, as experienced, expressed and practiced in early Chinese Christianity. When going through the impressive corpus of contemporary source materials – more than 200 seventeenth-century texts written by Jesuit missionaries, Chinese converts, sympathizers and opponents – one is struck by the central role played by that theme. Of course the Christian awareness of sin, the ritual of confession and the sacrament of absolution belonged to the “foreign input”: they formed part of orthodox Roman Catholic doctrine as it was propagated by the western missionaries. But here we rather are concerned with the receiving end: the way in which that complex was received by Christian literati and functioned in a Chinese context.

Secondly, there are good reasons to focus upon Fujian. During the last decades of the Ming, Fujian, and especially its coastal zone, was one of the most flourishing and most promising theaters of the Jesuit mission. This mainly was due to the effort deployed by one remarkable man, the Italian missionary Giulio Aleni (Ai Rulüe 艾儒略, 1582–1649) after his arrival in Fuzhou in 1625.¹ Under the protection of some important sponsors he established himself in the provincial capital Fuzhou 福州, and from there he started his campaign, traveling to almost every part of the province. Within ten years Christian communities had

¹ For Giulio Aleni see Pfister 1932, 126–137; Dehergne 1973; Lipiello/Malek 1997; Menegon 1994; Goodrich 1976; Pan 1994; Lin 1992; Zürcher 1990.

been established under local lower gentry leadership in the major cities, with Fuzhou and Quanzhou 泉州 as the main centers.

In the perspective chosen for this paper – the contextualization of the Doctrine of the Lord of Heaven as an exotic marginal religion in the Chinese milieu – Fujian is especially important because of the amount and quality of the Chinese source materials that have been preserved, not only Aleni's own large output of Chinese texts, but also works written by Chinese converts, some of which are truly unique in nature.²

Thirdly, the rather limited time span covered (the quarter century between Aleni's arrival in 1625 and ca. 1650) is imposed by the tragic course of events. The terrible devastations wrought by the Qing conquest in the years 1647–1648 and, somewhat later, the forced depopulation of the coastal zone dealt a blow from which the Jesuit mission in Fujian never recovered.

The Chinese Context

In introducing the subject, let me not stay too long on the high, oxygen-poor summits of generalization. The feeling of guilt, in the sense of the painful awareness of having willfully transgressed the norms of moral conduct, of course forms part of human experience, at least in all major civilizations. In the religious sphere the concept of sin, in the sense of a deliberate violation of rules that are imposed by higher beings or that form part of a cosmic order, is present in all major religions, as is the urge to eliminate it (or escape from its consequences) by some kind of moral purification.

In China self-examination and self-accusation have a long history, both within and outside the religious sphere, and much has been written about it ever since Wolfram Eberhard, in his pioneering study *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China*, showed the importance of interiorized guilt

² Special mention may be made of the eight-juan 卷 *Kouduo richao* 口鐸日抄 (Diary of Daily Admonitions), a collection of notes of conversations held by Aleni and some other missionaries with Chinese scholars in the years 1630–1640, compiled by Li Jiubiao 李九標; *Lixiu yijian* 勵脩一鑑 (A Mirror for Self-Cultivation), compiled by Li Jiubiao's brother Li Jiugong 李九功, containing, *inter alia*, a number of Chinese Christian miracle tales; *Shensi lu* 慎思錄 (A Record of Meditations) by Li Jiugong (posthumously published by his son, ca. 1680), and *Xichao chongzheng ji* 熙朝崇正集 (Orthodoxy Extolled in this Glorious Era), a collection of poems presented to Aleni by Chinese scholars.

in Chinese culture. Other landmarks are the studies by Wu Pei-yi on self-examination and confession; by Cynthia Brokaw on the so-called Ledgers of Merit and Demerit; by Sakai Tadao on morality books; and, on the Buddhist side, by Yü Chün-fang, and by Kuo Li-ying in her work on confession and remorse in Chinese Buddhism.³ Thanks to their efforts we can discern the contours of the Chinese indigenous landscape in which the Christian practices took place.

In the Confucian tradition, and especially in Neo-Confucianism, self-investigation (*xingshen* 省身), the critical moral assessment of one's own thoughts, words and actions as a first step in the process of self-improvement, had always played a very important role. The examination of conscience was focused on the observance of social virtues and on the elimination of egoistic impulses that stand in the way of their realization, but it always had a metaphysical dimension as well, for the Confucian virtues reflect the qualities of the cosmos itself. We are living in a moral universe; by realizing the inborn goodness of our nature we conform to the intention of Heaven. In Neo-Confucianism, the practice of self-investigation had also given rise to a type of spiritual exercise with religious overtones called *jingzuo* 靜坐, "quiet-sitting", no doubt under the influence of Chan Buddhism. *Jingzuo* introspection was practiced in the early morning or at the end of the day, in a secluded room, sometimes for a considerable time. It was an exercise on mental purification, and the contemplation of transgressions committed no doubt formed part of it, but there is no evidence that feelings of acute remorse and penance played a dominating role in it.

However, as Wu Pei-yi has shown, this rather optimistic self-image of the Confucian practicante underwent a remarkable change in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Roughly between 1570 and 1670 we find in certain Confucian circles what Wu Pei-yi calls "a deep awareness of the human proclivity to evil, an urgent need to counter this proclivity, a readiness for self-disclosure, and a deep anguish over one's own wrongdoings." This wave of *zisong* 自訟, "self-indictment", no doubt bore the stamp of the *Zeitgeist* of the late Ming, a period of social unrest, political turmoil, and, in some circles, libertarianism and conspicuous spending. It may well have been one reaction to the evils of the time, an introspective counterpart of Confucian moral crusades like the Donglin 東林 movement. On the other hand, it also may have been stimulated by

³ Eberhard 1967; Wu 1979; Brokaw 1987 and 1991; Sakai 1960; Yü 1981; Kuo 1994.

contemporary Buddhist or Buddho-Daoist practices of confession and self-investigation. It goes without saying that it is highly relevant to our subject, for two reasons: the coincidence in time, and the fact that it took place in the milieu of Confucian scholars, the primary target group of the Jesuit mission. But it also should be noted that in a strictly Confucian sphere, penitence is not coupled with the idea of divine retribution: ideally self-cultivation is supposed to be undertaken for its own sake, and not as a means to acquire *gong* 功, “merit”, or *fu* 福, “good fortune”.

In Buddhist and Daoist penitence, the accumulation of merit and the quest for good fortune play a central role, as does the belief in a universal law of retribution supervised or mediated by divine powers. There can be no doubt that the origin of lay penitential rites must be sought in monastic Buddhism. Since very early times the monks of a local parish were obliged to hold fortnightly *upoṣadha* meetings during which all the monastic rules were recited one by one. The rules are arranged in categories in descending order, from the most serious faults warranting permanent expulsion to minor transgressions that merely deserve to be criticized, or just to be noted. The confessional element lies in the fact that transgressors are supposed to report their fault when the relevant rule has been recited, and that the presiding monks can decide to impose a penance. This recurring purification rite always has been considered indispensable for maintaining the “purity” (*qingjing* 清靜) of the Buddhist order, without which it cannot function.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the increased participation of lay believers, both men and women, in religious life stimulated the development of collective penitential rituals (*chanhui* 懺悔) in which both clergy and laity took part. Like other Mahāyāna rituals, they served a double purpose. On the one hand, the confession of sins and the declaration of remorse are acts of moral purification that generate merit (*gong*) for the individual believer, resulting in improving his or her karmic destiny. On the other hand, the Mahāyāna belief in the possibility of “transferring” the merit thus gained to other persons (or at least of sharing it with them) stimulated their popularity, because such rites could be used to improve the lot of, for instance, deceased parents. *Chanhui* meetings also have an important devotional aspect, for the force of karma (which is impersonal and inexorable) is not directly influenced by the participant, but through the mediation of benevolent superhuman powers (Bodhisattvas or Buddhas) to whom the penitents appeal for mercy and forgiveness. In all this the role of the priests is essential: the priests

perform the ceremonial, they recite the confessional texts on behalf of the participants, and they transfer the merit to others. Their expert liturgical knowledge and their state of ascetic purity give them access to the divine powers. The latter are not only prayed to, but “invited”, and are believed actually to be present during the ceremonial.

An important further step was made by the popularization of the so-called Bodhisattva vow, a practice that probably dates from the fifth century A.D., and that in the course of time has become a standard element in Chinese Buddhist life. During this ritual, the candidate individually makes the vow to follow the Bodhisattva career before three senior monks; at the same time Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are called to witness. Since the Bodhisattva ordination is impossible without moral purification, he or she has to practice penitence and confession regarding all the forty-eight forgivable sins listed in the formulary, with utter sincerity and devotion, six times per day, before the images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Absolution – in the sense of a guaranteed remission of sins – is not conferred by a monk but by the divine powers themselves; it takes the form of some kind of supernatural “sign” (*xiang* 相) revealed to the practicant in a vision or in a dream. If after a full year the sign does not appear, the practicant’s karmic burden is too heavy, and the initiation has to be postponed till the next life. In this ritual, the act of penitence and the quest for forgiveness have become individualized, but the form of the confessional always is stereotyped and generalized. The practicant seeks redemption from sins of a certain category (e.g. vocal sins like lying, slander and backbiting) ever committed in the course of innumerable lives and in the present life; he or she promises not to commit them again, and asks for forgiveness. No specific sinful deeds actually committed are mentioned. In fact, in the Buddhist perspective it would make no sense to do so, because the vast majority of sins committed are supposed to date from former lives and cannot be remembered by the penitent.

In religious Daoism, confession started as a magical purification method associated with healing, the patient meditating on his sins and the Daoist master acting as an intermediary asking the divine powers to remove the pollution. However, already in early medieval times this was supplanted by *chanhui* rituals closely patterned after Buddhist examples. The belief in rebirth and karmic retribution became incorporated into Daoism, the main difference being that the ultimate aim pursued by the believer is not Buddhahood but becoming an Immortal.

On the other hand, the belief in “divine controllers” (deities reporting all transgressions to the higher echelons of the heavenly bureaucracy) and the idea that these acts were carefully recorded appear to be of Daoist origin and to have been taken over by Buddhism.

The latter belief in the recording and “quantification” of sin eventually became the doctrinal basis of a type of moralistic book-keeping known as *Gongguo ge* 功過格, “Ledgers of Merit and Demerit”. The oldest surviving example is a Daoist text of the twelfth century, but the genre and the practice based on it only became wide-spread in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when many *Gongguo ge* were published, also of Buddhist or Buddho-Confucian inspiration. In those later ledgers, the supernatural element (divine beings shortening or lengthening one’s life span on the basis of the account made up of merit and demerit points) is less prominent, although the system always presupposes some kind of divine or karmic retribution. The emphasis is on daily practice: each one of the positive and negative acts listed is worth a certain number of “merits” (*gong*) or “demerits” (*guo*), and this enables the user to keep track of his moral development and to improve his karmic situation. The importance of the *Gongguo ge* for the present subject lies in the fact that here, unlike in the Buddhist penitentials, the user renders account of specific transgressions that are recorded one by one and shortly after the event. It also marks a further stage of individualization: by using the ledger one controls the process of merit accumulation and thereby becomes master of one’s own fate. The system was widely accepted; on the other hand it occasionally was criticized by orthodox Confucians because of its “vulgar” emphasis on reward and punishment, and, as we shall see, also by Christians, albeit for other reasons.

After this brief survey of contemporary types of moral self-examination and confession let us turn to the main subject. How did Christian ideas concerning sin, remorse and release, and their ritual expression in confession and absolution, fit into this Chinese context?

There can be no doubt that to non-believers much of it seemed strange, but at the same time it was not so totally different from Chinese practice as to be quite unintelligible. The Christian practice of contemplating one’s own sinful deeds formed part of a program of meditative exercises (called *xingxiu* 省脩, “investigation and cultivation”, a Confucian term) that was reminiscent of Confucian *jingzuo*, “quiet-sitting”. Christian texts contained detailed lists of categorized sins to be used as a moral guide, almost like *Gongguo ge*. Like Buddhist and Daoist

believers, Christian penitents appealed to a supernatural power, with a priest acting as an intermediary. Sincere remorse followed by expiation was considered a means to accumulate “merit” and to improve one’s lot in the hereafter. Especially to Confucian scholars with Buddhist inclinations (as there were many in seventeenth-century Fujian) all this must have sounded somewhat familiar. But on the other hand the Christian complex showed a number of features that set it apart and defined its uniqueness in the Chinese context. In what follows I shall try to identify some of the most salient distinctive features of the Christian practice of *gaojie* 告解 (lit. “indictment and remission”).

“Confucian Monotheism”

Christians had their own definition of sin (*zui* 罪), one that was inextricably bound up with their belief in a single God, the Lord of Heaven, defined as the Great Father-and-Mother and the Great Ruler of the universe. He is both *ren* 仁, “benevolent”, and *yi* 義, “righteous”. Being benevolent, he loves every human being, even the most obstinate sinner, who like all other human beings has been endowed with the freedom to choose between good and evil so that he can mend his ways. But, being righteous, the Lord of Heaven also is the stern and impartial judge of souls. He knows whatever we think, say or do, and, in addition, he has written evidence, for all our good deeds are recorded by angels, and all our transgressions by devils.⁴ Since he is both the supreme Parent and the supreme Ruler, every sinful deed must be considered an act of rebellion: the sinner is both *buxiao* 不孝, “unfilial”, and *buzhong* 不忠, “disloyal” – the two most heinous crimes in the traditional Confucian scale of delicts.

Since the Lord of Heaven is compassionate, sins can be forgiven if they are duly regretted, confessed and expiated, but only during the present life on earth. After death the situation has become frozen: good is good and bad is bad; there is no middle way.⁵ As Aleni tells a critical Fujian scholar: compare it with your examination system. As long as you are composing your essay you can make any correction and improvement you like, but once you have handed it in, the Chief Examiner

⁴ KDRC 6.11a (devils) and 11b (angels).

⁵ The point is already made by Matteo Ricci in TZSY 6.11a (TXCH vol. I, p.553); Lancashire/Hu 1985, p 333. Cf. also KDRC 3.27a–b; DKW p.25b, and SSL 3.41a.

is inexorable: even the slightest mistake will lead to rejection and disgrace.⁶ Even having the slightest doubt about God's righteousness is an act of rebellion: Aleni takes one of his disciples to task because he, as a filial son, cannot imagine that he would enjoy bliss in heaven while his parents are tortured in hell.⁷ And when another critic remarks that the amount of sin one has committed always is limited, and that therefore the unlimited eternal punishment in hell is disproportionate, he is told that in view of God's supreme majesty even the slightest transgression is a major offence.⁸ We can understand why outsiders considered Christianity to be very *yan* 嚴, "severe"⁹

The Priest as a Mediator

Between the Lord of Heaven and the believer stands the figure of the priest as a mediator and as a ritual expert. He is a foreigner, for till the very end of the seventeenth century no Chinese priests were ordained. In Fujian Christianity, the role of the Jesuits as bearers of new scientific knowledge was of secondary importance. Since the making of astronomical observations was an imperial prerogative there was no observatory where they could exhibit their skills, and the Fujian gentry showed surprisingly little interest in those matters. To them the foreign master was, first and foremost, a *duode* 鐸德 (short for *saze'erduode* 撒澤爾鐸德 = *sacerdote*, "priest") or *shenfu* 神父, "spiritual father". In several ways that role was rather familiar in the Chinese context, in spite of its exotic trappings. During rituals the priest's sacral status (already implied by his celibatarian purity) was enhanced by his liturgical vestments and his use of unintelligible Latin mantras. Even the mystery of the Eucharist may have reminded outsiders of the way in which in Chinese cults, a deity or an ancestral spirit is "invited" to descend and to be present at the ritual.

⁶ KDRC 3.14a. Xiong Shiqi 熊世旗 has elaborated the examination metaphor in a *baihua* pamphlet entitled *Ce dai jing yu* 策怠警喻 (A Warning Allegory to Urge On the Indolent), with a preface by Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 (1557–1627) dated 1627; repr. in XJH vol. 1, pp.141–146.

⁷ KDRC 3.3a.

⁸ KDRC 5.12b–13a: this may be compared with making an impolite remark. If made to a commoner it is of no consequence, but if made to the ruler the result may be fatal. The same argument in Diego de Pantoja's (1571–1618) PZYQ 2.13a and in Francesco Sambiasi's (1582–1649) LYL 2.20b (TXCH vol. II, p. 1252.)

⁹ KDRC 8.1b; cf. also Li Jiugong in SSL 2.15a.

However, the role played by the Christian priest in the rite of confession and absolution does not appear to have any counterpart in traditional Chinese religion. In Buddhist penitential rites, the priest acts as a messenger reciting the confessional formulas and transferring the merit to other beings, but there is no question of his having the divine and exclusive authority to remit sins. The uniqueness of the Christian sacrament is stressed by Aleni: although other doctrines may “exhort people by good words”, only our doctrine knows absolution, and only Christians can receive it.¹⁰

The power attributed to the Christian priest required some explanation. In an interesting pamphlet entitled *Lingxi gaojie yaogui* 領洗告解要規, “Essentials of Baptism and Confession”, Zhang Geng 張賡, the leader of the Christian community in Quanzhou, answered some of the questions that had arisen, apparently even among believers. One of the questions is: “If I feel sincere remorse and the Lord of Heaven forgives me, why must there be a priest?” Another is: “The priest is our brother; why then must he sit so majestically in front of the Lord[’s altar] and listen to our confession, while we are kneeling down – is that not arrogance?” In his reply Zhang Geng draws an interesting parallel (borrowed from *Mencius*): During confession the priest’s position is comparable to that of the *shi*, the boy-medium who in the ancient ancestral ritual impersonated the soul of the dead; he was a young boy, but in that situation even elder relatives would kneel down and honor him.¹¹ Elsewhere Yang Tingyun and Aleni give the dogmatically correct explanation: the priest is authorized to confer absolution, for it is the Lord of Heaven himself who has entrusted the remission of sins to Saint Peter and hence, through apostolic succession, to the Pope, who again has conferred it upon all priests.¹²

Confession and Moral Self-Improvement

Confession only is effective if preceded by careful self-investigation that leads to a clear awareness of one’s faults and to the inner feeling

¹⁰ DZZG 3.7a.

¹¹ LXGJ 2a–3a.

¹² TSMB p. 62b (WXXB vol.I, p. 364). Cf. Aleni in DZZG 3.1a-2b: God has delegated the care of spiritual life to the Pope and the latter’s “officials charged with religion”, just as he has entrusted the administration of worldly affairs to the ruler and his senior officials.

of *tonghui* 痛悔, “bitter remorse”. The texts contain some guidelines for the methodical contemplation of one’s own moral conduct. They appear to be influenced by the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises, but they also show some affinity with Confucian self-cultivation and *jingzuo*. The practice forms part of the daily observances that every believer is supposed to perform. At dawn the practicant meditates and asks for God’s help to spend the day without committing any sins. At the end of each day he carefully reviews all his acts of thought, speech and body, whatever evil he may have done, and whatever good he may have failed to do. In the case of minor transgressions he thinks about a way to amend them, and the more serious ones are stored in his memory awaiting confession. Utmost care must be taken not to forget any sinful act, for no merit is gained by incomplete confession. It is therefore advisable to note them down in writing. At the end of each month or each fortnight all the major faults are inventoried, and if a priest is available an appointment must be made.¹³ The daily and monthly inventorying and recording of sins is useless if it is not accompanied by an intense feeling of guilt and remorse. Remorse can be inspired by fear, but it is better to follow the example of a filial son who simply cannot bear the thought of having neglected his parents, even if they do not reprimand him.¹⁴

All this sounds very methodical and programmatic. In fact, the Christian community leader Li Jiugong treats confession-and-absolution (*gaojie*) as a method of progressive spiritual purification, almost in a mechanical way. First one confesses the most grievous sins; after these have been forgiven one turns to the lighter ones. In this way one progresses until one is free from sin. As an additional exercise, it is advisable to remember the more serious sins one has committed and to confess once again.¹⁵

Confession should be made as frequently as possible, but actually only believers living in or near the few larger cities were able to do so. The others had to wait for the rare occasions when a priest visited their communities, and at best they would meet a missionary once a year. In the meantime, as Fan Zhong 范中 remarks in his *Brief Introduction to the Holy Doctrine* (*Shengjiao xiaoyin* 聖教小引, 1633), one must practice “self-accusation” and firmly decide not to sin again.¹⁶

¹³ DZZG 1.27b–29a; cf. also KDRC 3.5b and 4.24a; SSL 3.42a, and DKW p. 56b.

¹⁴ KDRC 3.22b–23a.

¹⁵ SSL 1.9a–10a.

¹⁶ SJXY pp.8b–9a.

Of course any suggestion that the Christian confession resembles the Buddhist *chanhui* is to be rejected. Yang Tingyun (an erstwhile devout lay Buddhist, hence well informed about such ceremonials) remarks that the Buddhist ceremonial is no more than an outward routinized ritual, not based on genuine self-examination. He also aptly observes that in *chanhui*, sins are listed in only very general terms, and that no mention is made of any specific sinful acts committed by the believers: "When *chanhui* has been completed, they still do not know what their confession has been about."¹⁷

The Classification of Sins

Occasionally, mention is made in Christian texts of the use of *Gongguo ge*, "Ledgers of Merit and Demerit." In an interesting conversation with a member of a Daoist association, Aleni agrees that in principle reflection about one's own sins is always commendable, but he adds that it remains ineffective as long as the practicant does not realize against whom he is sinning.¹⁸ Li Jiugong criticizes the system because in the *Ledgers* both merits and demerits are listed. The inclusion of meritorious deeds leads to self-complacency. Christians only note down their transgressions: "That is the method to achieve saintliness (*zuo sheng zhi fang* 作聖之方)."¹⁹

In one respect, however, the *Gongguo ge* system does bear some resemblance to the Christian method: in both cases a great number of acts (in the Christian case only negative ones) are formulated, categorized and methodically listed. An extensive survey of sinful acts (201 items, many more than found in any *Gongguo ge*) is included in Aleni's *Di zui zheng gui* 滌罪正規 ("Correct Rules for the Elimination of Sins"), arranged according to the Ten Commandments and the Seven Cardinal Sins. In the introductory section, Aleni explains how this part of the book must be used. Since it is essential that the penitent be clearly aware of any fault he may have committed, including the persons involved and the circumstances, the list is presented as an aid "carefully to be consulted item by item". Minor transgressions are also listed, for "the mirror is only wiped clean if even the smallest specks of dust are

¹⁷ DYP 2.19a–b. Cf. also KDRC 7.19a–b: Buddhist penitence is a sheer fraud.

¹⁸ KDRC 4.12a–b.

¹⁹ SSL 3.11a.

removed.”²⁰ It also is significant that Aleni published a shortened version of this work in one *juan* that consists of the list with only a few additional paragraphs. This *Dizui zheng gui lue* 滌罪正規略 was probably intended to be diffused on a wider scale than the original four-*juan* version, as a simple guide to confession.²¹

In its general arrangement and classification, Aleni’s inventory follows the European model. However, since it had to be used by Chinese converts, its content has been thoroughly adapted to the Chinese environment. Especially in sections dealing with religious activities and mantic techniques and with social relations (notably the prohibition of concubinage) the adaptation is obvious. Of course the text is normative and prescriptive, and therefore cannot be taken faithfully to reflect actual behavior, but as a “typology of sin” it is indicative of the formal value system that was current among Christian devotees. In what follows, special attention will be paid to two categories of offences: cases of superstitious behavior, and sins related to family life and other hierarchical social relations.

Sins Relating to Superstition

True to the principles of the monopolistic Mediterranean type of religion that the Jesuits propagated, virtually all beliefs and practices of Chinese religious life were declared anathema and presented as the work of the devil. Certain Confucian rituals were deemed acceptable, but only in a “purified” form, stripped of all superstitious elements. By doing so they naturally sided with the most orthodox and purist wing of Confucianism. Since medieval times there had been concerned scholars fulminating against Buddhist superstition and Daoist magic; some Neo-Confucians rejected “vulgar” practices like geomancy and the burning of counterfeit paper money, and excluded Buddhist priests

²⁰ DZZG 2.9a. In Yang Tingyun’s Christian biography by Ding Zhilin it is expressly said that Yang used Aleni’s DZZG as a guideline for self-investigation and confession; cf. YQY p. 8b (XJH vol. I, p. 232).

²¹ Aleni’s DZZGL has been included in the collection *Tongku jingji* 痛苦經蹟 (“Scriptural Texts Relating to Rigorous Observance”), compiled by João Fróis (Fu Ruowang 伏若望, 1591–1638); it is reproduced in WXS vol.III, pp. 1195–1272. I have not been able to consult another compendium entitled *Huizui yaozhi* 悔罪要指 (“The Essential Meaning of Repentance”). In Standaert 2001, p. 624, it is said to be by Lazzaro Cattaneo (Guo Jujing 郭居靜, 1560–1640), “edited by Aleni in the 1630s.”

from their funerary rituals. But in general even purists accepted the existence of such practices as belonging to the way of life of the unenlightened masses, and they did not want to eradicate them. Moreover, since in the Confucian tradition the personification of evil is unknown, they never would regard them as being inspired by any Prince of Darkness.

But that vision was very much alive among Christians. Both the Jesuits and their converts were convinced that the forces of evil preferably used false doctrines, magic arts and supernatural phenomena as means to delude mankind. In his *Shen gui zhengji* 神鬼正紀 (“Correct Description of Angels and Demons”, ca. 1630) Alfonso Vagnone (Gao Yizhi 高一志, 1568–1640) presents an interesting list of satanic supernatural phenomena, such as voices heard in the air, automatic script, images coming to life and uttering prophesies, and telekinesis. Possession by a demon can manifest itself by glossolalia (an uneducated person suddenly being able to speak foreign languages and to quote difficult texts), clairvoyance, thought-reading, and enormous physical strength.²² Forswearing pagan beliefs and rituals was a prerequisite for becoming a Christian. The act was ritualized: before baptism the neophyte had to forsake all his former superstitions, to remove and destroy (by burning or burying) all the “demonic” images he possessed, and to burn all his non-Christian religious texts and talismans.²³ The ostentatious break with the past could not escape public attention, for it also meant that converts removed the protective images (“door gods”) that had decorated the entrance of their homes and replaced them by the emblem of Christ.

In Christian sources, much attention is paid to the description and condemnation of popular religious beliefs and customs. More than thirty of these are listed by Inácio da Costa (Guo Najue 郭納爵, 1603–1666) in his *Zhuo sumi pian* 燭俗迷篇 (“Elucidating Vulgar Superstitions”) of ca. 1642. In Aleni’s *Di zui zheng gui* the emphasis naturally is on their prohibition: they are listed as “sinful” (*you zui* 有罪) under the First Commandment, i.e. as acts of rebellion against God himself. They comprise three categories of offences:

²² *Shen gui zhengji*, 4 j.; manuscript in Xujiahui Library, Shanghai (modern transcript). Cf. also KDRC 2.31a: all pagan rituals are inspired by the devil.

²³ SJXY p.7a. Cf. also KDRC 6.1b-2a: before baptism Christians are held to remove all idols from the altar in their house chapels (*jiatang* 家堂).

- Firstly, all mantic techniques such as fortune-telling by drawing divination lots and by using the planchette, geomancy, the election of lucky days, physiognomy and astrology, are qualified as sinful.
- Secondly, also sinful is any kind of contact with Buddhism or Daoism. It is a long list that includes visiting temples and reciting scriptures and mantras; making vows; holding *jiao* 醮 rituals; contributing money to the restoration and decoration of temples and to the making of idols; copying and possessing pagan scriptures; not destroying one's pagan texts and idols before baptism but selling them or giving them away, and any personal "contaminating" contact with Buddhist monks, Daoist priests and magicians.
- Thirdly, it is a sin to believe in pagan faith-healing and prophetic dreams; to ascribe supernatural powers to herbs, trees and animals; to write Daoist charms; to pronounce spells; and to join brotherhoods sealed with blood.²⁴

We never shall know to what extent these prohibitions were heeded by the mass of believers. The very fact that they are listed suggests that at least some Christians engaged in such ungodly activities. But in any case we may conclude that really conscientious believers were obliged to renounce virtually the whole body of traditional religion and religious lore, and by doing so could not but marginalize themselves as a group.

Sins Relating to Social Life

Many sins pertaining to family life and other hierarchical social relations are appended to the Fourth and the Sixth Commandment ("Honor thy father and thy mother" and "Thou shalt not commit adultery"). The Commandments are used as headings covering a number of analogous offences, as also was done in western confessionals. Thus, sinful conduct mentioned under the Fourth Commandment is not restricted to the relation between children and parents, but is extended to cover relations between other juniors and seniors within and outside the family: teacher and pupils, master and servants, and husband and wife. Only a few of these sins are explicitly related to Christianity, notably committing sacrilegious acts in serving one's parents and failing to

²⁴ DZZG 1.10b–11b; a somewhat less comprehensive list is provided in DZZGL pp. 5b–6a (WXSb vol. III, pp. 1206–1207).

provide religious instruction to one's relatives. Apart from these, the list reads like a survey of traditional Confucian morality expressed in prohibitions.

This is not amazing, for both the Jesuits (before the Rites Controversy) and their educated converts always claimed that their doctrine represented what is *zheng* 正 (“normative, correct, orthodox”), implying that it fully conformed to Confucian values and, indeed, could contribute to their realization. Expectably, the most grievous sin in this category is lack of filial piety. Inferiors sin by not submitting to their superiors; pupils by disobeying their teachers; subjects by trespassing the laws of the authorities (*guanfu* 官府); the wife by not serving her husband. On the other hand, the master of the house commits a sin if he maltreats his slaves and servants, and the husband if he does not provide his wife with her daily necessities.²⁵ Social inequality is natural and intended by God – and if there were no poor, how would the rich be able to gain merit by charity?²⁶

The only very important exception is the absolute prohibition of polygamy, i.e. the taking of a concubine. In the list of sins, concubinage ranks higher than sodomy, enjoying pornography and visiting prostitutes. It is to be condemned even if no son is born from regular marriage.²⁷ On this point no compromise was possible: cases are known of very distinguished prospective converts being refused baptism until they had sent away their concubine, and if after baptism a member of the congregation yielded to social pressure and took a concubine he risked being excommunicated.²⁸ The condemnation of concubinage was

²⁵ DZZG 1.14b–16a and 18a–b; DZZGL pp. 8b–10a and 12b–13a (WXS vol. III, pp. 1212–1215 and pp. 1220–1221).

²⁶ KDRC 1.14b–16a and 4.4a–5b.

²⁷ KDRC 2.28a–29b; cf. also the interesting argument brought forward by Aleni: if, as sometimes happens, childlessness is due to the husband's physical condition, would then his wife be allowed to take a second husband? (KDRC 2.28b).

²⁸ A well-documented case of the latter is that of Wang Zheng, the well-known technologist and “pillar of the faith” in Xi'an, who for some time was excommunicated because he, at an advanced age, had taken a concubine under heavy family pressure. He was readmitted only after having sent her away and having made a written statement of remorse – a curious document that has survived. It is appended to the collection of edifying tales presented orally by Adam Schall (Tang Ruowang 湯若望, 1592–1666) and noted down and edited by Wang Zheng 王徵, entitled *Chongyi tang riji suibi* 崇一堂日記隨筆 (Daily Record of Miscellanea Made at the Chongyi Church), Xi'an, 1638; WXS vol. II, pp. 833–837.

a Christian innovation that raised serious problems and controversies. To many outsiders it seemed to confirm the immoral nature of that religion, because it violated the Confucian rule that a filial son must use any means to secure male offspring.

The Ritual

The actual ritual of penitence, confession and absolution closely follows the European model. The believer is expected to make confession at least once a year, in the church, in front of the altar, where the priest is seated. He is supposed to have prepared himself by self-investigation and remorse, “as if facing a stern judge”. He approaches the priest, takes off his cap (in Chinese eyes a very humiliating gesture) and kneels down; he kowtows and recites the “Scripture of Confession” (*Huizui jing* 悔罪經, the Confiteor). After having described the sins committed since his last confession, he recites the formulaic profession of remorse, and asks forgiveness. The priest then comments upon the nature and gravity of the sins confessed, and confers absolution. In case of serious faults he imposes a penance. The penitent puts on his cap, thanks the priest and leaves.²⁹

Unlike the Buddhist *chanhui*, the Christian confession was individual, personal and highly confidential. The penitent was held to report about his sinful deeds and inclinations, and even to disclose his most secret feelings and temptations, giving details as to time, place, frequency, circumstances, and persons involved. Especially in the Chinese context, this created a psychological barrier of shame and humiliation. In his tract about baptism and confession mentioned above, Zhang Geng refers to the hesitation felt by many believers: “It is disgraceful and shameful to confess your own sins!”, and: “It is disgraceful that confession is so direct and complete!”³⁰ Elsewhere Aleni, answering some questions that evidently were inspired by feelings of shame, has to disappoint his interlocutor: no, sinful deeds have to be confessed one by one, and not summarized in general terms; no, confession must be oral

²⁹ DZZG 3.2a-22a. Needless to say that all this refers to confessions made by male believers. For female penitents there must have been special procedures, for the missionaries had to be extremely cautious in having any contact – let alone this kind of confidential face-to-face conversation – with women.

³⁰ LXGJ pp.3b-4a.

and cannot be made in writing.³¹ In a section significantly named “Be Ashamed of Sinning, not of Confessing”, he tells a story illustrating that it is the devil himself who inspires such shame in order to prevent the sinner from being saved.³²

Penance

The last stage of the procedure is that of penance: the task of expiation imposed by the confessor, both for the benefit of the penitent (for expiation is a means to gain merit) and as a compensation for the harm done to others. The content varies according to the type of sin. Acts of impiety towards God are compensated by religious observances like prayer and reciting texts, harm inflicted upon others, by charity. The third category, to which much attention is paid, serves to expiate sinful deeds resulting from the weakness of the flesh. It consists of acts of self-mortification (*ku* 苦) such as shorter or longer periods of asceticism (including rigorous fasting and sexual abstinence) and self-castigation.

Self-mortification, even in extreme forms, was by no means unknown in traditional China. Self-mutilation (notably feeding one's ailing parent with one's own flesh) and very rigorous mourning practices were considered laudable expressions of filial piety. Pilgrims occasionally indulged in at least a show of self-laceration. Burning scars in the top of the skull formed a regular part of Buddhist ordination; many Buddhist monks sacrificed fingers by burning, and monks publicly torturing themselves while collecting alms were a common sight in Chinese cities. Christian asceticism had its own peculiar forms and its own inner motivation, but as a phenomenon it was not unfamiliar.

Chinese Christians had their role models near at hand. The exemplary lives of saints (a genre of pious literature that was very popular in Christian circles) abounded with stories of extreme ascetics and self-torture. In addition, some Jesuits themselves could show the way, for self-mortification was extensively practiced in the period in Europe, as well as by some missionaries in China. In fact, Aleni himself is said to have done so, chastising himself with a whip every night, “in order

³¹ DZZG 3.7a–10b.

³² DZZGL pp. 34b–35b (WXS vol. III, pp.1264–1266).

to appease the Lord's anger."³³ Especially in Fujian, zealous converts are said to have indulged in long and bloody disciplines, "carrying iron chains" to such an extent that Aleni had to restrain them.³⁴ He had to do the same with Zhang Shi 張識 (Zhang Geng's eldest son, baptized "Michael"), when the young zealot made a vow to chastise his body with a thousand lashes during the forty days of Lent.³⁵ Flagellation and rigorous fasting appear to have been the most common types of bodily penance, but reference is also made to other practices such as sleeping in an upright position or on the floor, and wearing a horsehair shirt and a girdle made of coarse rope or metal.³⁶

Of course we must not assume that the majority of believers went to such extremes; in most cases penance was no doubt routinized and superficial. But even if draconic methods of chastising the flesh were only confined to a small minority, they must have reinforced the general opinion that Christianity was very "severe".

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have made an attempt to treat one essential element of the doctrine of the Lord of Heaven in its Chinese context and to identify points of convergence and of difference. Late Ming Christianity in Fujian was not an alien body: as a not insignificant minority religion, it formed part of the varied religious landscape of the region. It was practiced by small groups that held distinctive and sometimes even dissenting ideas centered on the belief in the Lord of Heaven, the divine autocrat and controller of human fate in life and death. All the other beliefs and rituals current in this Christian subculture bore the stamp of a very strong monotheistic creed that had no counterpart in the traditional Chinese world-view.

The Christian complex of sin, confession and penance shows many points of convergence with contemporary traditional trends, ideas and practices, as noted above. In a general way it also conformed to the general trend towards individualization, and it certainly showed affinity

³³ As related by Li Sixuan 李嗣玄 in his biography of Aleni, SJAX p. 7a; cf. Zürcher 1997, pp. 85–128, esp. p. 114.

³⁴ Cf. Pfister 1932, p. 132.

³⁵ ZS p. 3b.

³⁶ YQY p. 9a; SJXY p. 9a–b.

with the Confucian puritanical reaction to real or supposed moral decay, laxity and libertarianism.

On the other hand, the complex is illustrative of an alternative, idiosyncratic faith and life-style, the deviant character of which was still enhanced by its non-Chinese origin, by the presence of western priests, and by the fact that the latter derived their power to remit sins from a foreign sacral authority: a shadowy figure called “the Religious Sovereign” (*jiaowang* 教王 or *jiaohuang* 教皇, the Pope). In addition, among outsiders, Christian rigorousness and the many obligations that serious believers were compelled to fulfill appear to have been a source of amazement and ridicule: “They laugh at us and say that our religion makes us suffer.”³⁷ Aleni counters this complaint by pointing out to his disciple that outsiders do not know about the heavenly reward that is in store for devout Christians. Believers have to exert themselves constantly, like scholars who are preparing themselves for examinations or like peasants who work their fields till their hands and feet have grown callous. The burden of being a practicing member of a Christian congregation may be illustrated by a passage from the *Meditations* (*Shensi lu*), in which Aleni’s erstwhile disciple Li Jiugong exhorts his brethren to stand firm:

It often happens that those who just have become followers of the Teaching of Heaven are jeered at and ridiculed ... But if we are afraid of being laughed at by others for doing good, must we then refrain from doing it, just to avoid ridicule? If we do that, we must turn inward and criticize ourselves. The Scripture says that metal is tested by a blazing fire, and that virtue is tested through hardship. If you cannot stand one jeer, you may be sure that your religious fortitude is too weak. You rather should use that ridicule as an incentive, like a horse that runs faster when it sees the whip.³⁸

³⁷ KDRC 6.15a.

³⁸ SSL 3.1a–2a; cf. also KDRC 6.15b–16a.

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