

Article

One Hundred Years of Echoes: The Influence of the Jesuit Aleni on the Spiritual Life of the Manchu Prince Depei

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Abstract: This paper reveals the interweaving of three traditions—Christian, Manchu, and Han Chinese—in the work of an unduly neglected figure in early modern China, Aisin-Gioro Depei 愛新覺羅·德沛 (1688–1752), who was a Manchu prince, neo-Confucian philosopher, and likely, a hidden Christian. The analysis demonstrates that Depei developed a particular syncretic philosophy based on the rational theology that he learned from the works of a significant Jesuit missionary, Giulio Aleni (1582–1649, 艾儒略), notably Aleni's *Xingxue cushu* 性學述 (A Brief Introduction to the Study of Human Nature). Using resources from Christian and Confucian traditions, Depei puts forward an approach, which marks the continuation of the cross-cultural interpretation movement launched by the missionaries since the late Ming.

Keywords: hidden Christian; neo-Confucianism; Manchu; Depei; Giulio Aleni

1. Introduction

One of the greatest allures in the field of history is the search for what beckons us from afar, approaching it through the mists of time and language. While Japan's "hidden Christians" (Kakure Kirishitan) are well known due to academia and the entertainment industry, the images of the modest members of China's Christian communities, notably hidden or sympathizer communities, have remained in the dark (Standaert 2001). One of the most enigmatic and charismatic figures among them is Aisin-Gioro Depei 愛新覺羅·德沛 (1688–1752, hereinafter Depei), a Manchu prince, high official, neo-Confucian philosopher, and likely a Catholic.¹

As the great-grandson of Aisin-Gioro Surgaci (1564–1611), whose oldest brother, Nurhaci, was the founder of the Qing dynasty, Depei was born in the Manchu royal family and grew up in a privileged environment. He spent his youth cultivating his scholarship, and then entered public service and eventually became an able official in a series of senior posts throughout China. According to a missionary report, while serving as the Governor of Hunan and Hubei provinces (*huguang zongdu* 湖廣總督), he "governed with the greatest equanimity and justice, so that even pagans called him a 'saint'" (Krahl 1964). He was given the title Prince Jian (*jian qingwang* 簡親王) of the First Rank when he retired in 1748 and was posthumously honored as Prince Jianyi (*jianyi qingwang* 簡儀親王) of the First Rank.

While his official biography underscores his royal titles and political achievements (Zhao 1985, vol. 215, pp. 8952–53), the records kept by his contemporaries emphasize his moral character and philosophical interests, especially his passion for the ancient classic *Yi-jing* 易經 (*Book of Changes*) (Yuan 1993). Depei not only established himself as a Manchu noble with an intellectual inclination for Confucianism; he was also a known neo-Confucian philosopher in his times such that after his death, there was a view that he should be set among the most celebrated Confucian figures receiving offerings (precisely, *congshi* 從祀) in the Confucius Temple (Yeh 2010; Chen 1997, p. 330).² Although the vision did not materialize, perhaps this is one of the most striking examples of the confluence of three traditions—Christian, Confucian, and Manchu—in history.



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However, Depei fell into oblivion after his death. As a Prince, his reputation was obscured by the downfall of the Empire (Elliott 2001; Rawski 1996). As a Manchu, he was ignored by scholars of Chinese thought, as the heritage of non-Han ethnic groups, notably the Tibetans, Mongols, and Manchus, has tended to be marginalized in the field. His spiritual existence as a likely practicing hidden Christian (see below) is largely unknown. Only a few studies have examined his life and thought, and even fewer have noticed the thorough digestion and assimilation that his lifework presents in the context of a profound cross-cultural dialogue (Shen 2014).

Among the small number of studies on him, two are important. The article published by Chen Yuan in 1932 (1980) on Christians in the Manchu royal family in mid-Qing was groundbreaking (Chen 1980; Tang and Chen 2002)³; the author argued for Depei's Christianity and identified the influence of missionaries' works on him, particularly his scientific ideas (Song 1994; Xin 2013; Li 2012; Gao 1995; Zhang 1997).⁴ More recently, William Rowe's 2020 article has offered a considered approach to Depei's Christianity and philosophy (Rowe 2020). As Rowe puts it judiciously, even though there is no decisive evidence for Depei's Christian faith, many records seem to point in that direction (Chen 1980; Xin 2013; Krahll 1964; Standaert 2001).⁵ Should it be the case, the secrecy of his Christian faith is understandable; as suggested by the tragedy of the Sunu family, a Manchu noble family that converted to Catholicism, a Manchu identity, even with a noble title, did not guarantee a sanctuary from the ban of Christianity issued by the Kangxi Emperor (reigning in the 1661–1722 period) in the 1720s.

Unsurprisingly, Depei's communications with the missionaries are surreptitious and hard to retrieve (Krahll 1964, pp. 15–17); there is no explicit reference to either Christianity or the missionaries' influences in his published works. Nonetheless, these works, like a window discreetly left open, allow observant readers—who may find that they reveal rather than hide the reality of a living and burning religious life—to explore the world from a curious “in-between” position.

Depei is credited with four books, listed in Table 1, with two of them being on philosophy in general and two on the *Yijing* in particular.⁶ The fourth seems to be lost, but the first three, all published by the middle of his life, have survived.⁷

Table 1. List of Depei's work.

| Title | Publication Year | Version in Existence |
|--|------------------|--|
| <i>Shijian lu</i> 實踐錄 (<i>A Record of Practice</i>) | 1736 | Stored in Bibliothèque Nationale de France (CHINOIS 3445) Also found in Nicolas Standaert, Adrian Dudink, Nathalie Monnet, ed. <i>Faguo guojia tushuguan mingqing tianzhujiao wenxian</i> 法國國家圖書館明清天主教文獻 vol. 12 (Taipei: Ricci Institute, 2009), pp. 87–146. |
| <i>Aofeng shuyuan jiangxue lu</i> 鰲峰書院講學錄 (<i>Dialogues in the Aofeng Academy</i> ; hereinafter <i>Dialogues</i>) | 1741 | Stored in Beijing: Zhongguo guojia tushuguan 中國國家圖書館 (Index No. 52505) |
| <i>Yi tujie</i> 易圖解 (<i>Annotations to the Diagrams in the Book of Changes</i> ; from now on <i>Annotations</i>) | 1741 | Xuxiu sikuquansu biancuan weiyuanhui ed. <i>Xuxiu sikuquanshu</i> 續修四庫全書 vol. 19 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), pp. 675–708. |
| <i>Yi buzhu</i> 易補註 (or <i>Zhouyi buzhu</i> 周易補註, <i>Supplemental Notes on the Book of Changes</i>) | Unknown | Unknown |

In his 2020 article, William T. Rowe thoroughly examines Depei's ontological and ethical views, notably his mention of *lingxing* 靈性, which, Rowe suggests, is likely to be another expression of the Christian concept of the soul. However, a significant missionary source on which Depei's thought relied extensively has been neglected in Rowe's argument: the work of the Italian Jesuit Giulio Aleni (1582–1649, known as Ai Rulue 艾儒略 in Chinese), one of the most knowledgeable and revered Catholic missionaries since Matteo Ricci (Criveller 1997; Fang 1988; Menegon 1994; Pan 2020a; Zürcher 1997b). As illustrated in the following pages, Depei loads his books with references to Aleni's work, particularly the *Xingxue cushu* 性學述 (A Brief Introduction to the Study of Human Nature, ca. 1624; hereinafter referred to as *Introduction*) (Aleni 2020; Standaert and Dudink 2002), which is an adaptation of the Coimbra Jesuit commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima* (1598) and *Parva Naturalia* (1592) (Meynard 2017; Pan 2020b, 2021).

Depei is distinctive, as his work explores the rational dimension and mystical meaning of the Christian message. In more technical terms, he uses a mix of two languages: one drawn from natural or rational theology (Latin: *theologia naturalis* or *rationalis*) with the fundamental concepts he learned from Aleni, and the other related to the *Yijing*, a supposed Chinese revelation, which he was inspired to investigate by the Figurists such as Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730, Chinese: Bai Jin 白晉).⁸ We will argue that confrontation with a foreign tradition affected him in a way similar to Aleni or Bouvet. Although there is no smoking gun proving that he is Christian, Depei's extraordinary familiarity with the missionary sources is difficult to interpret in any other way. In the present study, we focus on the philosophical–theological speculation of Depei in light of that encounter and reserve the examination of his syncretic mysticism for a future discussion.

2. Faith in God

2.1. Confucian Monotheism

Viewed historically, Depei's thought comes in the wake of what Erik Zürcher, referring to late Ming lay Christianity, calls “Confucian Monotheism”, in which the person of God is underscored, whereas the person of Jesus can be underplayed or even ignored (Zürcher 1997a, p. 623), especially in the works more tuned towards intellectuals. More generally, his work represents the continuation of a century-long epic interpretation movement. The first missionaries in China launched the movement in the face of a people proud of their long tradition, but it also involved the Chinese interlocutors who were exposed to a whole body of scholarship built on the back of an alien worldview (Standaert 2012).⁹ The gap to be filled in Depei's work entails two interweaving processes. On the one hand, he seemed convinced of what the missionaries saw as divine truth and sought to propagate it. On the other, he adopted many terms from Confucianism. In this respect, a convert probably faced no less of a struggle than a missionary.

The emphasis on God as the Creator and the supreme ruler of the universe, or, as the missionary works published in Chinese put it, *tianzhu* 天主 (Lord of Heaven), originated in Michele Ruggieri's (1543–1607, Chinese: Luo Mingjian 羅明堅) work, *Tianzhu shilu* (Canaris 2023). While the idea of the person of Jesus, along with the more difficult doctrines—such as the Incarnation, Immaculate Conception, and the Resurrection—can be a source of endless theological inquiry, an emphasis on natural theology seems more manageable to swallow for the Chinese. By associating God with certain notions in early Confucianism, such as *tian* 天 (Heaven) and *shangdi* 上帝 (“Sovereign-on-High”), Ricci and his followers were able to argue for the consistency between the Christian and Confucian traditions. This perspective was accepted by the converted literati and partially by many non-Christian Chinese authors (Wang 2004; Wu 2009, pp. 449–506; Lü 2012).

Not surprisingly, Depei found the early texts meaningful. Both *tian* (precisely, *shang-tian* 上天, literally “Heaven-on-High”) and *shangdi* (Depei 2009, p. 125) were used in his works. For instance, in his work titled *A Record of Practice*, he depicts *shangtian* as follows:

The Heaven-on-High, which is the Creator and which is speechless and odorless, rules and observes everything quietly. Nothing escapes from His sight. 造物無聲無臭之上天，鑒臨洞察，莫見莫顯，而無遜情。

(Depei 2009, p. 122)

This depiction can be viewed as condensing two poems of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Songs) that draw much attention in Chinese Christian communities because of their explicit religious connotations:

Shangtian zhi zai, wu sheng wu xiu 上天之載，無聲無臭 (The working of *shangtian* is speechless and odorless).

(Zhou 2002, p. 398)

Shangdi lin ru, wu er er xin 上帝臨汝，無貳爾心 (*Shangdi* rules over thee; Thou shalt not be unfaithful).

(Zhou 2002, p. 401)

The latter was referred to, prior to Depei, by at least two converts as evidence that the early Chinese knew the Christian God: Li Zhizao 李之藻 (1571–1630), one of the “three pillars” of early Chinese Christianity, in his preface to Ricci’s *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義 (*The True Meanings of the Lord of Heaven*, 1603), and Chen Yi 陳儀 (birth and death years unknown) in his preface to Aleni’s *Introduction*.

Besides this notion, the mention of the imperceptible nature of Heaven (*mo jian mo xian* 莫見莫顯) suggests the impact of the idea of meticulous attention to moral failings, however minor or unwitnessed, at the beginning of the *Zhongyong* 中庸 on Depei’s understanding of *di* 帝 or *shangdi* 上帝. In *Annotations*, Depei accounts for *di* 帝 or *shangdi* 上帝 and suggests that all things on earth, such as fruits ripening in autumn, are prepared by this God for humans to meet their needs (Depei 2002, p. 700–1). The similarity in referring to the early texts about *tian* 天 (Heaven) or *shangdi* 上帝 between, on the one hand, the missionaries and converts, and on the other, Depei, may well suggest a shared belief in an omniscient and omnipotent God.

However, appropriating local ideas for Christianizing ends became increasingly controversial when concerns emerged about heterodox or even heretic beliefs being promoted within and without the Society of Jesus. The controversy culminated with the ban on using *shangdi* in reference to God in the Jesuit China Mission after the “Terms Controversy” in the late 1620s. However, while the review that the society imposed on the publications of its members¹⁰ is such that very little fell through the cracks, the distinction between the clergy and laity made room for the unrestrained growth of theological inquiry on the latter’s part. The converted literati seemed relatively free to interpret Christian doctrines in favor of their consistency with China; these interpretations, like in the case of Li Zhizao and Chen Yi, were tolerated and existed alongside the Jesuits’ printed accounts. That interpretation potential was fully tapped in Depei, who wrote in relative isolation, unlike Li and Chen, who could meet and talk freely with the fathers. While, in some cases, an isolated explorer risks going astray due to a lack of guidance, it seemed that Depei’s belief that he was receiving glimpses into the truth of the universe overpowered any sense of his adversity or isolation. This partly explains the polarized reaction to Depei’s work among contemporaneous missionaries—some of them appreciated his work, whereas others regarded it as suspicious or even that it should be burnt (another reason might be the Figurists’ influence on him; see below) (Krahl 1964, p. 16).

2.2. Scholastic Natural Theology

Other terms with which Depei refers to a specific ontology that implies, or at least is compatible with the Christian God, besides *tian* and *shangdi*, include (1) *zaowu* 造物 (the Creator), (2) *taiji* 太極 (the Supreme Ultimate), and (3) *Shen* 神 (Deity); the third is a term that is only available in his *Annotations* in the context of *Yijing* exegesis.

The idea of the Christian God as *zaowu* was derived from Ricci and Aleni. To Ricci, the woeful lack of knowledge of one true God in contemporary neo-Confucianism was closely related to a general lack of awareness about one of the most central tenets in the Judeo-Christian tradition—the distinction between the Creator and the Created (Fang 1988, p. 70; Ricci 2016, p. 208).¹¹ Among other terms, Ricci adopted *zaowuzhe* 造物者 (often shortened to *zaowu* 造物 in Chinese literature and poems), a term dating back to early Daoism (e.g., *Zhuangzi*, 6.5), to denote God and highlight His role as the Creator (Ricci 2016, p. 208). For Ricci's successors, such as Aleni (see below) and Francisco Furtado (1587–1653) (in his *Mingli tan* 名理探, 1630), the usage of this term develops into a neologism that is more religious, *zaowuzhu* 造物主, which is a bricolage of the Chinese-originating *zaowu* and *zhu* 主 (Lord), a common word referring to God in Chinese Christianity.

Furthermore, Ricci (2016, pp. 45–46) and Francesco Sambiasi (in his *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠡勺, 1624) were the first, in Chinese, to make use of Aristotle's theory of the four causes—or rather, the Christianized Aristotelian–Thomist version of it, in which God is identified as the final and efficient cause (Meynard 2015). Nevertheless, it is through Aleni that the theory is expressly associated with the idea of God as *zaowu/zaowuzhu* (Ricci 2016, pp. 45–46). The association is not insignificant; it forms an important thread of the extensive influence that Depei receives from Aleni, as stated in Aleni's *Introduction* (sect. 1.1–1.3):

The Western studies on the fathoming of the principle discuss the various things within the cosmos as being all constituted from four causes: efficient (*zao*), final (*wei*), material (*zhi*), and formal (*mo*). ... The efficient cause of existing things falls into two categories: great cause and small cause or general cause and particular cause. The Lord of heaven and earth is the great and general source of all that is made, the origin of everything; the things of the cosmos are the small and particular causes which propagate their species, or help other things to propagate their species. ... The original will of the Creator (*zaowuzhu*) is called the final cause. All things are created for a purpose and do not happen by chance nor in vain, and moreover, they are not for their interest, but in truth, they were created to serve human beings, and human beings to serve the Lord. In the beginning, when all things were created, He had to establish the function of various things and endow them with a corresponding nature and appropriate faculties. Like making pottery, He first decided the use of various tools, like the kiln and the cauldron, and then He modeled their shape and made them to correspond to their function. 西土窮理之學，論宇內諸物，悉繇四所以然而成：一曰造，一曰爲，一曰質，一曰模。... 造復有二，有大小焉，有公私焉。大者公者，即天地大主，爲造化之宗，萬有之原也；小者私者，爲寰宇物品，或能自傳其類，或能助物以傳其類。... 所謂爲者，乃造物主之原旨。其生物皆屬有意，非偶然，非徒然，又非爲利己也，實在生物以事人，生人以事主也。故凡生物之始，必先定諸物之用，而因賦以相稱之性、相得之才。如陶冶然，因定窯竈釜鐵諸器所用之意，而後範其形體，俾各適其用焉。¹²

(Aleni 2020, pp. 84–87)

Both the theory of the four causes and the subsequent pottery metaphor¹³ reappear in Depei's *A Record of Practice*:

All things are constituted from four causes: material (*zhi*), formal (*mo*), final (*wei*), and efficient (*zao*). It is like the making of things by potters or blacksmiths: iron and clay are the material cause; the shapes of the potteries, long or short, square or round, are the formal cause; the use they are intended to fulfill, the final cause; they cannot be so all by their own but must be made. The one who makes (*zao*) them is the worker. The worker has a complete idea in his mind about what has to be made before he makes it. 凡物皆有質、有模、有爲、有造。如陶冶之工之造器也：鐵土者，質也；器之長短方圓之形者，模也；其所用者，爲也；然不能自成，必有造之者，造之者，陶冶之工。預作器先之成局，已備工人胸中矣。

(Depei 2009, p. 126)

The idea of God as *zaowu*, or the efficient cause, also appears:

Not only humans but the myriad of things between sky and earth is constituted from the four causes. Yin and yang are the material cause; the physical shapes, the formal cause; the uses they are made for, the final cause; the efficient cause (*zaozhi zhe*) is the Creator (*zaowu*), who had a complete idea about what had to be made before He made it. 不但人有之，天地萬物皆有之：陰陽者，質也；有形有體者，模也；其所司者，爲也；造之者，乃造物，其成局腹藁，在造物之中也。

(Depei 2009, pp. 126–27)

The difference is that while Aleni stops at the idea of God as the Creator and the efficient cause, Depei goes further. He equates the idea of a creator God with *taiji* 太極, a term that first appeared in the *Yijing* and transformed into a metaphysical conception by the neo-Confucian philosopher Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073).

The Creator (*zaozhizhe*) is fundamental; He is *taiji*. The material, formal, and efficient causes are all His manifestations. The fundamental being properly set, all its manifestations will be coming out naturally and appropriately. 造之者爲本，太極也。質模爲者，其發也。本若得其中，發之自然中節也。

(Depei 2009, p. 127)

The missionaries condemned the equation of God with *taiji* for suggesting the unprincipled accommodation of a living philosophical tradition that was independent from the theological structure of ideas they adhered to. Even the initiator of the accommodation strategy, Matteo Ricci, made his opposition clear (Ricci 2016, pp. 77–82). However, to a Chinese convert, the equation can be essential: it implies the belief that divine truth has already been embodied in the source of the Chinese tradition and that neither modern Chinese's ignorance nor the distortion of it could diminish it altogether. The belief not only explained the existence of that tradition, but it also suggested a method of building a grand existential project in which China—particularly the modern guardians of its cultural heritage like himself—would play a role. However, as illustrated in the following pages, it allowed the acquisition of truth through rational philosophy and logic coupled with speculation and insight into the divine mystery.

3. Moral Metaphysics

3.1. Mencius, Aleni, and Depei

Besides the idea of God as *zaowu*, another legacy of Aleni found in Depei is a definitional approach to the soul theory using natural reason in scholasticism. A bridging word indicative of the double sources of Christianity and Confucianism, *lingxing* 靈性 (intellective nature), is crucial.

The word *lingxing* is a compound constituted of *ling* 靈 (spiritual or intellective) and *xing* 性 (nature), and it is a key term in neo-Confucianism, the orthodoxy of late Ming Chinese society. Although the term has a history in early Chinese Christianity,¹⁴ Aleni intentionally used it as a nexus to communicate Christian and neo-Confucian spiritual traditions (Ricci 2016, pp. 31, 38). In Aristotelian–Thomism, the soul, or *anima*, is divided into three levels: the vegetative soul (*anima vegetativa*), the sensitive soul (*anima sensitiva*), and the intellective soul (*anima intellectiva*). While the vegetative soul is pertinent to plants, and the sensitive soul is pertinent to animals, the intellective soul subsumes the vegetative and sensitive souls and is pertinent to humans. Only human beings have intellective souls, which form the foundation of Christian spiritual practice.

However, the soul theory experienced some difficulties in China. While the Jesuit missionaries tended to use *hun* 魂, an existing term (often juxtaposed with *po* 魄 in early texts), to translate *anima*, the idea of a disembodied intelligent entity in humans, called *hun*, as Zürcher points out, is marginal in Chinese thought (Zürcher 1997a, pp. 619–20, 629). Unlike the case of the forbidden *shangdi*, early modern missionaries appeared ambiguous about finding a corresponding word for *anima* in Chinese. Whereas the soul was intro-

duced to the Chinese reader in the form of transliteration *ya-ni-ma* 亞尼瑪 in *Lingyan lishao* 靈言蠡勺 (*Humble Attempt at Discussing Matters Pertaining to the Soul*, 1624) by Francesco Sambiasi (1582–1649) and Xu Guangqi 徐光啓 (1562–1633), Aleni made a different choice (Duceux 2009; Meynard 2015; Shen 2015). He attempted to make the maximum use of local traditions without compromising the Christian faith. In his *Introduction*, Aleni refers to the (intellective) soul with many terms, mostly *linghun* 靈魂 and *lingxing*. For instance, *Introduction* sect. 2.8 reads the following:

The proclivities of the soul (*linghun*) and the physical body are opposed, and this is the evidence that there are different entities (*ti*). [...] Look at animals: they have a reckless attitude when rutting because their soul and physical body are bound together and cannot go separately. But in human beings, the situation is different. Passions are harnessed by rationality and put under tight control, like a galloping horse by the reins. [...] Generally, different orientations necessarily originate from different entities (*ti*). The proclivities of the intellective nature (*lingxing*) are not only different from that of the physical body, but can even be opposite, and the former can overwhelm the latter, like enduring extreme forms of suffering or “sacrificing life to realize benevolence.” This suggests that the soul and the physical body are different. 以靈魂肉軀情向相背，證其判為二體。... 乃觀鳥獸欲動孳尾時，無所顧忌，其魂與肉軀混一，不得自主故耳。人則不然，以道馭情，力能控制，如勒奔馬。... 大凡相反之情，必繇于不同之體。今靈性為用，不惟不與肉身同好惡，且恒有相反之情以禦之。或忍大苦以為道，或甘捨身以成仁，則於形體為二又可見矣。

(Aleni 2020, pp. 128–29)

Aleni preferred *lingxing* to *linghun*: his *Introduction* was once published under the tentative titles of *Lingxing pian* 靈性篇 (*Essays on the Intellective Nature*) and *Lingxing cushu* 靈性彙述 (*A Brief Introduction to the Intellective Nature*). Whatever terms he used, he insisted on the ontological difference between the soul, or the intellective nature, and the physical body in humans. Aside from this notion, his emphasis on the soul–body distinction or even conflict suggests a distancing from Thomas Aquinas, who stressed the intellective soul’s natural tendency to be united with the body, or more generally, the Thomist tradition that the Jesuits follow. As the equestrian metaphor suggests, it had a Platonic character and associated ascetic tendency instead, which was to be inherited by Depei (see below).

To Aleni, the idea of the soul was implied abundantly in early Chinese texts, notably the *Four Books*. In the *Daxue* 大學 (*Great Learning*), the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (*Doctrine of the Mean*), and *Mencius*, he maintained that the many terms that he found were used as synonyms. *Introduction* (sect. 1.7–1.9) states the following:

In brief, human beings are constituted by two elements: the soul (*lingshen*) and flesh. One is internal; the other, external. One is spiritual (*shen*); the other, physical (*xing*). ... One is a small part (*xiaoti*); the other, a great part (*dati*). In this regard, the major part, which is internal and spiritual, also called the intellective nature (*lingxing*), refers to the intellective entity that is exactly human nature. It is also called “intellective soul” (*linghun*) to distinguish it from the vegetative and sensitive souls ... In the *Great Learning*, it is called the “illustrious virtue” (*mingde*), meaning that the original essence (*benti*) is clear by itself, and also illuminates the principles of the myriad of things. In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, it is called the “middle path before manifestation” (*weifazhizhong*), referring to the source where emotions originate from. In the *Mencius*, it is called the “great part” (*dati*) to emphasize its significance. In brief, the names are different but refer to the same entity. 總之人以靈神肉軀二者而成，一為內，一為外；一為神，一為形；... 一為小體，一為大體。如此論之，其內神大體，或謂之靈性，指其靈明之體，本為人之性也。或謂之靈魂，以別於生覺二魂也。... 《大學》謂之明德，指其本體自明，又能明萬理者也。《中庸》謂之未發之中，指其本體諸情之所從出也。《孟子》謂之大體，指其尊也。總之稱各不一，而所指之體惟一。

(Aleni 2020, pp. 92–95)

A particularly significant hermeneutical move made by Aleni here is equating the soul–body distinction in Christianity with the distinction Mencius made between *dati* (great part) and *xiaoti* (small part) regarding moral discipline. As *Mencius* 6A states,

The parts of the person differ in value and importance. Never harm the parts of greater importance for the sake of those of smaller importance, or the more valuable for the sake of the less valuable. [...] He who is guided by the interests of the parts of his person that are of greater importance (*dati*) is a great man; he who is guided by the interests of the parts of his person that are of smaller importance (*xiaoti*) is a small man. [...] if one makes one's stand on what is of greater importance in the first instance, what is of smaller importance cannot displace it. In this way, one cannot be but a great man. 體有貴賤，有大小。無以小害大，無以賤害貴。...從其大體者為大人，從其小體為小人。...先立乎其大者，則其小者不能奪也。此為大人而已。

(Mencius 2005, pp. 14–15)

It is difficult to tell whether Aleni's association between the soul theory and Mencius's moral teaching is a strategic misinterpretation, considering the ambiguity of the word *ti* 體 in Chinese. Scarcely less prominent is the absence of well-structured philosophical reasoning that the *Introduction* features. Nevertheless, Aleni's almost anecdotal hermeneutic finds its echo in Depei, who talks about *lingxing* extensively and brings the alleged association to a new level.

3.2. Great Part and Small Part

Depei elaborates on *lingxing* and succinctly redefines it as follows:

What is the intellective nature (*lingxing*)? It is that which was endowed to the great part (*dati*) of us humans by Heaven. 靈性者何？天命與吾人大體也。

(Depei 2009, p. 98)

This definition seems to condense the entire hermeneutic of Aleni. The first part is taken from the famous beginning of the *Zhongyong*, “What Heaven has conferred is called Nature” (*Tianming zhiwei xing* 天命之謂性),¹⁵ with the “*tian*”, presumably interpreted as God, and “*xing*,” following the line of inquiry set by Aleni, as the human soul. The second part, related to *dati*, evidently originates from *Mencius*. The *dati*, or the intellective nature, Depei argues, is endowed by Heaven, which, as one might reasonably be inferred, refers to God:

The meaning of “What Heaven has conferred is called the human nature” is that the physical body or the *xiaoti* is given and reared by one's parents whereas nature, or the *dati* is conferred by the Mandate of Heaven. Heaven is speechless, odorless, and is completely perfect and omnipotent. The human nature cannot be witnessed or heard. It is purely good and utmost intelligent. Following the innate tendency of nature is what is called the path of the *dati* and the “enlightening virtue.” “天命之謂性”者，受親之育之，謂小體之身；承天之命之，謂大體之性也。天乃無聲無臭，全美至神。性則不睹不聞，純善至靈。循其性之所之，而謂所學大體明德之道。

(Depei 2009, pp. 121–22)

Depei's first concern is to lay the transcendental foundation for moral practice. There had been a historical trend of providing Confucian moral ideas with a renewed metaphysical foundation since the neo-Confucian philosophers in the eleventh century. These philosophers were in favor of the optimistic view of human nature represented by Mencius in early Confucianism, adding that the good in humans must have its metaphysical rationale in something completely perfect, as Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) put it, *li* 理 (principle). Depei followed up that idea with the difference that his moral metaphysics insinuated an overtone that was alien to most early modern Chinese literati. His self-proclaimed Confucian identity notwithstanding, Depei's intellectual program is grounded not in a cos-

mology based upon the spontaneous creation of *li* 理 (principle) combined with *qi* 氣 or a specific raw material, but a creationist belief (Depei 2009, p. 95; 1741, p. 43). Compared to the average neo-Confucian philosopher, he emphasizes the imperceptible side of the supposed source of human morality in particular and humanity and the universe in general, even when it is philosophically unnecessary or irrelevant. This, in turn, betrays an awareness of the divide between the phenomenal world we experience and the truth it exists to reveal.

Although the basis of his thoughts is, for obvious reasons, nowhere openly revealed, he conceived of the universe not as a spontaneously created whole, as the neo-Confucian philosophers did, but as the subject to a hidden transcendent creative power. Therefore, the focus is on moral metaphysics based primarily on the absolute certainty that human nature, endowed by a neo-Platonic, all-powerful, all-good, and all-knowing deity, is “purely good” (*chunshan*). He subscribes to the circular argument that the immanent goodness of human nature proves and is proven by the assumption of such a deity. *Tian* or God is the transcendental source of guidance, and it is each person’s mission to “follow the innate tendency of nature,” a paraphrasing of the *Zhongyong* idea of *shuaixing* 率性 (following nature). Depei’s entire moral philosophy is founded on this belief. In their apologetic writings, the missionaries had similar views; or rather, the Creator-created distinction was the one point they stressed most thoroughly.

The second step toward moral metaphysics using a rational theological approach is to engage in a moral practice to cultivate a moral self. A difficult question is how to reconcile the profound faith in the human capacity for good with the human flaw that allows for decadence and immorality. In the Christian tradition, the question falls into the topology of theodicy, which offers a theological approach to understanding the classic “problem of evil” proposed by the Greek philosopher Epicurus. The term with which Depei tackles the question, *e* 惡, is the Chinese word for evil, which was relatively rare in the writings of neo-Confucianism philosophers. He explains that the blame falls on the *xiaoti*, or the physical body (*quke* 軀殼), which, driven by selfish desires (*renyu* 人慾), presents many problems and is the source of evil:

To summarize, all evils originated from the physical body or the *xiaoti*. This is why people can be small persons. The only way to be a great person is to nurture the intellective nature, or the *dati* that is endowed by Heaven, and not being overwhelmed by the physical body or the *xiaoti* is to stick to one’s conscience and keep it from the distraction of desire. As such, one is exclusively concerned about his morality rather than interests. 總之諸惡皆因軀殼小體起建，故為小人也。養靈性天命之大體，不為軀殼小體所奪，而為大人者，惟有天良，不參人慾，則知道德，不知利害。

(Depei 2009, pp. 102–3)

The argument is an illustration of Christian–Confucian synthesis with respect to spiritual practice. It is a continuation of thinking in terms of the neo-Confucian dichotomy of *renyu* and *tianli* 天理 (heavenly principle) or *tianliang* 天良 (heavenly conscience), and even the old dichotomy of *li* 利 (benefit) and *yi* 義 (righteousness) in early Confucianism. Meanwhile, the dichotomies are subsumed to a Christianized frame: the underlying soul–body dualism, as well as the implied tendency to depreciate the body as morally inferior, originate in Aleni, as illustrated above. Moreover, the equestrian metaphor that appears in *Introduction* (sect. 2.8) remains as follows:

To regulate one’s body with nature is just like to harness a galloping horse by rein; he must not relax. Otherwise, the *xiaoti* will overcome the nature which is endowed by Heaven. 以性制身，似控勒奔馬，不敢稍有懈弛，而使小體奪其天命之性也。

(Depei 2009, p. 121)

A corollary to these stern ethics is the appreciation of, as Vincent Shen (Shen Qing-song) puts it, “repressive virtue” (Shen 2014, p. 196). Depei stressed our morally and

existentially precarious position and the necessity of employing the technique of close self-monitoring. Regarding his vigilance against the demoralizing power of physical pleasure, he holds that to live an ethical life means to eschew pleasure altogether. A sincere self-explanation is recorded in *Dialogue*, in which Depei recalls his early experience with a burning spiritual pursuit:

I am a member of the royal family. What Mencius mentions as “their hall is tens of feet high, the capitals are several feet broad” and “their tables, laden with food, measure ten feet across, and their female attendants are counted in the hundreds”¹⁶ were all ready for me before I was born and I grew up with them. However, they could never fulfill me. If enjoying luxury does not harm the *dati*, there is no need to abstain from it like shunning defilement. The only reason I chose not to do so is that I realized the importance of the *dati* and I was afraid that an even small indulgence of *xiaoti* would have been in violation of Mencius’ teaching. Thus, I have been exerting restraint for fifty years since I started learning in my childhood. 余分支玉牒，承蔭天潢。凡孟子所云堂高數仞，榱題數尺，食前方丈，侍妾數百人，未生而咸備，稍長而裕如，無所俟於得志。苟其果屬可好，而好之無害於大體，何必避之如浼。惟是認得大體二字頗真，誠恐稍侵其小體，即爲孟子所不許。故自髫齡向學，至今歷五十年，未嘗敢一日自肆。

(Depei 2009, pp. 102–3)

The attitude is quite in line with neo-Confucian ethics, which treasures *Mencius* and stresses the perennial battle between the *renxin* 人心 (human mind), stained by selfishness, and the *daoxin* 道心 (moral mind-heart) that is pure and flawless (Depei 1741, p. 41; Chen 2015). It does not have much to do with physical pleasure or, more generally, happiness, but with how physical pleasure is dismissed.

3.3. The Good Life

When asked about happiness, which is a traditional theme that has been gaining importance since Zhou Dunyi’s questioning of the “happiness of Confucius and Yan Hui” (*kongyan lechu* 孔顏樂處) in neo-Confucianism, Depei takes a critical look at the prospect of human life:

Someone asked: “I heard that Luo Rufang (Jinxi) interprets happiness (*le*) with the idea of euphoria (*kuaihuo*). Is this interpretation consistent with the happiness of the sages?” The answer is: “people would better avoid talking about happiness so easily. Happiness does not exist in the extravagance of the world. [...] People who believe that life is happy believe that their lifetime increases accordingly with each extra year. However, from my perspective, every passing year means the sinking of the year into the abyss of death. All the passing days are like dreams or illusions which [we] will never retain and are not different from death; regarding the days to come, living one more day means to be one step closer to death. Further, whether you will live long or short is unpredictable, the fall of death tends to be unexpected. People can die suddenly when they are strong or suffer misfortune. Therefore, the ancient sages were eager to improve their morality but not concerned about a hedonist life. Luo Jinxi argues that the word ‘*huo*’ means life, the word ‘*kuai*’ means swiftness or euphoria, and the two words combined together mean living a euphoric, vigorous life and this is what the sages mean by happiness. However, the interpretation is misleading; it makes people believe that happiness equals euphoria and allows them to indulge into physical pleasure pertinent to the *xiaoti* and regard the Confucian self-discipline pertinent to the *dati* as painful.” 聞羅近溪以快活解樂字，果與聖賢之樂合否？曰：人不易言樂也。而世俗紛靡麗之境，樂尤不與存焉。……夫人之以生世爲樂者，長一年謂多生一歲。以余觀之，過一歲即已死一年也。蓋以往之日，如夢如幻，不可復留，即與死無異；而未來之歲，多生一日，即與死漸近一步。且修短不能預知，生死難以意料。人固

有甫當強壯，忽而夭亡者。又有罹於禍災，變生不測者。是以古之聖賢，以及時修德為亟亟，而不以時行樂為繫懷。倘如羅近溪所解，活之為言生也，快之為言速也，活而加快，生意活潑，是即聖賢所謂樂，如此解樂字，恐人之誤以快活為樂者，鮮不以小體之貪生好逸為快活，而以大體之克己復禮為困苦也。

(Depei 2009, pp. 59–60)

The answer presents the tension between two competing schools of neo-Confucianism: the principal school (*lixue* 理學) that Depei belongs to and the Mind school (*xinxue* 心學) that the figure being mentioned, Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515–1588), belongs to. Gaining momentum with its spiritual leader, Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), the Mind school has been becoming increasingly popular in Chinese society from the sixteenth century onward. The routes that the two schools take are close to opposite. While an overemphasis on the normative effect of *li* 理 or *tianli* 天理 can lead to an authoritarian ethical view that suffocates or, as the mid-Qing thinker Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724–1777) says of it, “kills in the name of Principle,” the Mind school chooses differently. By propelling Mencius’ profound faith in the human capacity for good to an extreme, this school encourages everyone to inquire into their minds with respect to the cultivation of a moral self, believing at a deep level that such inquiry cannot go astray. This explains a sense of unconstraint that tends to be found in the philosophers of the school. For instance, the idea of euphoria or Happiness in Luo pertains to Benevolence (*ren* 仁) and implies the joyful communion between the Confucian Sage and the world (Huang 1985, vol. 2, p. 791). Although Luo’s cheerfulness does not encourage physical indulgence, it is no surprise that a serious teacher of morals like Depei would find it intellectually misleading and spiritually frivolous. Whereas an ethical life is, as Depei suggests, not necessarily painful, happiness per se is not worthy as an end. Virtue, instead of happiness, stands as a top priority, as it has, according to Christian teaching, the promise of a postmortem reward, which, in turn, justifies the sacrifice of worldly pleasure.

Furthermore, what is relevant to happiness is not a discrepancy between factions, but rather a common area where both Christian and Confucian traditions overlap: the good life. A primary reason why Depei disagreed with Luo is left unstated: what is past and present in this life is merely a prologue; the glory that the immortal soul will receive in heaven pales all worldly success and underscores the irrelevance of all of the frets in which the corruptible physical body becomes engaged. As a corollary to this perspective, the meditation of and preparation for death play crucial roles in the Christian spiritual traditions, or precisely, the stoic ideas absorbed by Christianity. The theme of the good life can be understood as that of the good death or preparation for death in the Christian context.

This is why the missionaries, from Ricci to Aleni, spun visions of a future in which everyone’s lives are fundamentally conditioned by the indefinite, yet inevitable, arrival of death. The works of both Ricci and Aleni, for instance, are insinuated with discussions on the inevitability and unpredictability of death and, thereby, the necessity for Christians to be ready for it. Two entire chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) in Ricci’s *Jiren shipian* 畸人十篇 (*Ten Chapters by An Extraordinary Man*, 1608) are dedicated to the significance of preparing for death. At the beginning of the treatise, Ricci says that he has “lost” fifty years when a Chinese friend asks about his age. “All the passing years counts [sic] as passing away (*jiwang zhi nian ji yi wei si jiang qu* 既往之年皆已為死將去),” explains Ricci to his surprised Chinese friend (Zhou 2013, p. 209). Similar ideas can also be found in Aleni’s *Wushi yanyu* 五十言餘 (*Fifty Additional Remarks*, 1645):

Nothing is more important than life and death, and nothing is more unpredictable than the end of life or the arrival of death. Living one more day means to be one day closer to death. 事莫大於生死，又莫定於生死之期。若生期多過一日，則死期便迫一日。

(Ye 2011, vol. 1, p. 378)

Depei’s idea that “living one more day means to be one step closer to death” above is almost a verbatim copy of Aleni’s words. The close relationship between the ideas of

Aleni and Depei, despite the temporal distance of one whole century between them, is so pronounced that it is surprising how little is known about it.

There is, however, a difference. Unlike in the case of Ricci or Aleni, the notion of an afterlife, as Rowe (2020, p. 60) notices, is completely lacking in Depei's moral metaphysics. Nor does any claim suggestive of the immortality of the human soul or an intellectual nature appear therein. Considering that Depei was likely to be a highly literate and well-informed believer, this approach was less likely borne of ignorance than conscientious concealment, or rather, an application of the Catholic doctrine of the "mental reservation," which allows believers to hide their faith in difficult circumstances.

While the "Confucian monotheism" in late Ming was more the way Christianity was received, the "Confucian Christians," namely educated elite converts, faced some particular challenges. The challenge for Depei was bringing doctrinal discussions into public view while avoiding being too obvious about it in the mid-Qing anti-Christian context (Mene-gon 2009). This difficulty raised a question about whose presence was subtle in late Ming and eventually became strong and inescapable for Depei: to what extent will a believer, particularly one with a non-Western background, keep their faith quiet without invoking certain tenets?

Overall, Depei's moral metaphysics, grounded in rational theology as it is, has two features that make it unique and philosophically consequential. First, as mentioned above, some fundamental aspects of Christian teaching are missing or unclear. Second, as well as the result of the first one, is that it gives rise to an anthropology in which the hope for moral perfection lies not in His grace but in the practitioners' own wills and deeds. The "self-help" spirit is strongly linked to the peculiar account of *tian* or God that Depei presents. Depei's God, if we may say so, is one that neither shows grace nor performs miracles; instead, He, after having completed His creative job, recedes into the background and leaves humanity alone in the world. Once born and endowed with a soul, humans must realize their human nature's potential and depend on themselves to cultivate human decency and establish moral order.

As such, the trajectories of Chinese and European Christianity meet. The late seventeenth century witnessed a trend toward secularization and drifted away from the existing Christian perspective. While rational theology declined from its Thomist peak in the fourteenth century in Catholic Europe, it came around in another form in "Confucian Christians" in late-Ming and mid-Qing China. The efforts of several generations involving both missionaries and converts to build a Chinese theology using natural reason reached their highest triumphs in the mid-eighteenth century through the work of Depei.

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Notes

- ¹ Unlike in the case of Kakure Kirishitan, whose Christian identity can be confirmed by observational evidence such as the statues of the Virgin Mary disguised as the Buddhist deity Kannon, the clues of the existence of hidden Christians in the eighteenth century in China can only be adduced using historical material. For details on Depei's life, see the works by Yuan [Chen](#) (1980, pp. 164–82) and Hao [Fang](#) (1988, pp. 66–70). In particular, for details on Depei's baptism and his communications with missionaries, see the work by [Xin](#) (2013, pp. 382–95).
- ² For details on the importance of the Confucius Temple in Confucian tradition and the selection of the Confucian figures revered or worshipped in the Temple of Confucius, see the works by Chin-shing [Huang](#) (1994, 2001, 2002).
- ³ The interest in Depei has since been largely limited to the scope of Manchu studies, and the few existing mentions of him are crude and often contain factual errors.
- ⁴ Three recognized sources from which he draws upon scientific ideas are Johann Adam Schall von Bell's (1591–1666, known as Tang Ruowang's 湯若望 in Chinese) *Zhuzhi qunzheng* 主製群徵 (1629) and *Yuanjing shuo* 遠鏡說 (1626); Ferdinand Verbiest's (1623–1688, known as Nan Huai ren 南懷仁 in Chinese) *Yukun quantu* 坤輿全圖 (*Complete World Maps*, 1674) and Kunyu tushuo 坤輿圖說 (1674). Another suspected source, as Chen Yuan puts it, includes Matteo Ricci's (1552–1610, known as Li Madou 利瑪竇 in Chinese) *Jiren shipian* 畸人十篇 (*Ten Chapters by A Freak*, 1608) and *Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義 (*The True Meanings of the Lord of Heaven*, 1603) ([Chen](#) 1980, pp. 164–82; [Xin](#) 2013, pp. 382–95).
- ⁵ Depei was believed to be baptized by the German Jesuit Ignaz Kögler (1680–1746) in 1718, with his baptismal name being “Joseph.” He was referred to as “Te-p'ei”, “Tepey”, or “Joseph Te” in the missionaries' reports. He kept his Christian faith confidential throughout his life, but told his wife, his valets, and some missionaries such as Gottfried von Laimbeckhoven (1701–1787). Depei was not a perfect Christian in terms of his personal life. He had two concubines, which was strictly forbidden in Christianity. The tragic experience of the Sunu family not only occurred because of their faith, although their Christian faith was listed among the charges against them, but more due to the consequence of political disagreements. For details on Depei's family life, see the work by [Zongrenru](#) (1982, p. 8772).
- ⁶ The last two books were included in the list of Yijing studies recorded in *Qingshi gao* 清史稿.
- ⁷ Rowe, in his 2020 article, mentions that he was unable to access *Aofeng shuyuan jiangxue lu* 鰲峰書院講學錄 and could only quote from the second source, Chen Yuan's 1932 article. Fortunately, we found the book in *Zhongguo guojia tushuguan* 中國國家圖書館. See Table 1.
- ⁸ The subject will be discussed separately in another paper.
- ⁹ Standaert rightly points out that there was an underrepresentation of the Chinese side in the sixteenth–seventeenth-century Chinese-Christian intellectual exchanges.
- ¹⁰ All Jesuit works need to be checked three times in detail by multiple reviewers before publication in observance to the rules of the Society of Jesus.
- ¹¹ Hao Fang points out the popularity of the divide between the Creator and the Created in Catholic literature in late Ming and early Qing.
- ¹² Unless otherwise indicated, all of the translations of the quotations from Chinese literature in the present study are provided by the author.
- ¹³ The pottery metaphor is present in both the Bible and early Chinese texts. In Jeremiah 18.1–23, it is used to describe the work of the Creator toward Israel. There is also a popular Chinese pottery metaphor that dates back to the second century BC. For instance, in *Huainanzi* 淮南子, *juan* 2, chapter 1, the unnamed author provides a generative cosmology: “When the distinction between being-ness and nothing-ness were not yet made, heaven and earth were kept as a whole and the myriad of things were in the process of pottery-making” (有未始有有無者，包裹天地，陶冶萬物).
- ¹⁴ The term is likely to have been invented by [Ricci](#) (2016, pp. 31, 38). Yang Tingyun 楊廷筠 (1562–1627), a Chinese convert and one of the “three pillars” in early Chinese Christianity, also uses it. The history of the term deserves an independent discussion.
- ¹⁵ Translated by James Legge. Cf. <https://ctext.org/liji/zhong-yong/zhs?en=on>, accessed on 1 January 2022.
- ¹⁶ The quotes are from Mencius 7B: 34 ([Mencius](#) 2005, p. 201). The mention of luxury in reference to Mencius can also be found in *A Record of Practice* ([Depei](#) 2009, p. 99). Shen mistakenly takes the mention as a criticism of the extravagant lives that some Manchu nobles lived in Depei's time ([Shen](#) 2014, p. 195).

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