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Catholic Theology and Confucian Ritual Exegesis: Zhu Zongyuan's New Interpretation of the Rites of *Jiao* and *She*

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Abstract

Zhu Zongyuan's short treatise Jiao she zhi li suoyi shi *Shangdi* ye (郊社之禮所以事上帝也, The rites of the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices are for serving *Shangdi*, the Supreme Lord) introduces the strictly monotheistic concept of God from Catholicism, shaping the Shangdi of the Confucian classics into a supreme and unique sovereign who commands all spirits. Through this theoretical construction, he convincingly argues that although the rituals of Jiao and She differ in form, their object of worship is ultimately the same, thereby resolving the long-standing Confucian debate between separate sacrifices and joint sacrifice at an ontological level. This interpretive approach elevates this treatise beyond mere proselytizing literature, establishing it as a representative work that engages with Confucian classical scholarship through Catholic theology. It signifies the emergence of an independent intellectual lineage within the Chinese scholarly tradition, characterized by a synthesis of Christianity and Confucianism.

Keywords: Zhu Zongyuan; the rites of *Jiao* and *She*; *Shangdi*; Confucian Christian

1. Introduction

The Sino-Western cultural exchange in the 17th century represents a profoundly significant encounter in the history of human civilization. Jesuit missionaries, epitomized by Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), initiated a dialogue spanning ethical systems, cosmological views, and religious practices. Traditional narratives in mission history often simplified this process as a "dissemination of Western learning" (西學東漸) emphasizing the unidirectional transfer of knowledge from European missionaries while overlooking the proactive selection, interpretation, and reconstruction of the foreign Catholic religion by Chinese society. However, with the Sinological turn in mission studies since the 1980s, the latter dimension has gradually entered academic discourse. Erik Zürcher pioneered the concept of "Confucian monotheism" to describe Chinese Catholicism shaped by the "Chinese Cultural Imperative" (Zürcher 1994). Inspired by this framework, a new research field centered on Chinese Christians during the Ming and Qing dynasties has emerged, encompassing, but not limited to, reflections on interpretative paradigms (Standaert 2002), explorations of intellectual traditions (X. Zhang 2005), and studies of community networks (Xiao 2015). These studies collectively highlight a distinct group of Chinese Catholics who neither wholly adopted the doctrines preached by missionaries nor severed ties with indigenous Chinese culture. Instead, they functioned as independent and proactive cultural agents navigating the interplay of dual cultural imperatives. In recent research, Nicolas Standaert has uncovered previously overlooked Chinese voices in Western religious debates (Standaert 2012).

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Against this backdrop, previously obscure Chinese Christian figures have garnered increasing scholarly attention, Zhu Zongyuan (朱宗元), a 17th-century Confucian Catholic from Ningbo (寧波), emerges as a representative case. Dominic Sachsenmaier's seminal work delves into Zhu's life, thought, and writings, employing an individual perspective to examine the interweaving of global and local histories during the late Ming and early Qing periods, thereby illuminating the complex historical processes of early globalization (Sachsenmaier 2018). The very title of his work, *Global Entanglements of a Man Who Never Traveled*, underscores Zhu's distinctive representativeness. Like many Chinese Christians of the Ming–Qing era, Zhu was passively drawn into the global expansion of Catholicism, yet he also made unique contributions to Catholic globalization through the dynamic interplay between Catholic and Confucian traditions.

Nevertheless, while such studies focus on Chinese voices, their perspectives remain predominantly Catholic and global in orientation. Sachsenmaier's analysis reveals how Zhu Zongyuan constructed an identity that balanced competing cultural forces; building on this, we may further explore how Confucian Christians engulfed in Catholic globalization integrated global connections into their local lives, or how they applied Catholic knowledge within Confucian moral and political practice. In other words, it is essential to regard these Confucian Christians not only as a distinct type of Christian, but simultaneously as a unique form of Confucian.

Zhang Xiaolin's (張曉林) recent article points toward the latter perspective. He examines Zhu Zongyuan's short essay *Jiao she zhi li suoyi shi Shangdi ye* (郊社之禮所以事上帝也, literally: *The rites of the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices are for serving Shangdi*; hereafter abbreviated as: *On the rites of Jiao and She*), which offers a Catholic reinterpretation of the suburban sacrifice ritual. By comparing Zhu's approach with Matteo Ricci's treatment of the same topic in *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義, *The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven*), Zhang concludes that Zhu's interpretive framework was decisively shaped by his Confucian standpoint (X. Zhang 2023). Yet Zhang's primary aim lies in comparing hermeneutic models rather than providing a detailed analysis of Zhu's specific interpretation of the suburban sacrifice. Whereas Ricci mobilizes the Confucian classics to demonstrate the existence and attributes of the Christian God, Zhu Zongyuan, writing a generation later, presupposes this God and uses the very concept of a sovereign monotheistic *Shangdi* to reinterpret the Confucian classics and their sacrificial rites. Though his essay is brief, its purpose was not evangelization, but rather participation in Confucian intellectual discourse. It stands as a representative example of how Chinese Christian scholars during the Ming–Qing period employed Catholic theology to address issues in classical Confucian exegesis: a phenomenon that remains relatively rare in the historical corpus of Chinese Christian texts from the Ming and Qing eras.

2. Zhu Zongyuan and His Works

Zhu Zongyuan, styled Weicheng (維城), was a native of Yin County (鄞縣), Zhejiang Province (present-day Yinzhou District, Ningbo 寧波市鄞州區). Like many figures recorded in historical documents yet remaining relatively obscure, our knowledge of Zhu Zongyuan's life is extremely limited and filled with discrepancies and controversies. Scholars have disputed factual issues such as the year of his birth, the time and place of his baptism, his imperial examination status, the dates and nature of his major works, the catalogue of his writings, and the scope of his textual collation and translation (Gong 2006, pp. 60–63; Wang 2010; Gong 2023).

He was born in the early 17th century, toward the end of the Wanli (萬曆) era of the Ming dynasty,[1] and was baptized in Hangzhou (杭州) in 1638, receiving the Christian

name Cosmas. The baptism was administered by the Italian missionary Lodovico Buglio (1606–1682).

After his baptism, Zhu actively evangelized in his hometown, leading to the conversion of his mother, two brothers, and other relatives and friends. Despite his Christian faith, Zhu continued to participate in the imperial civil examinations. He earned the title of *gongsheng* (貢生, tribute student) in 1646, and later became a *juren* (舉人, provincial graduate) in 1648.

Zhu maintained close relationships with missionaries such as Emmanuel Diaz Junior (1574–1659), João Monteiro (1603–1648), and Girolamo de Gravina (1603–1662), and repeatedly participated in the revision and translation of missionary writings. In 1659, he invited the Dominican Juan Bautista de Morales (1597–1664) to carry out missionary work in Ningbo. The following year, Morales administered the last rites to Zhu, who died in 1660, aged just over forty (Sachsenmaier 2018; Gong 2023).

Zhu Zongyuan's extant works are relatively few. With the aim of persuading his family to convert, he co-authored with Zhang Nengxin (張能信) a short proselytizing tract entitled *Pomi lun* (破迷論, *Breaking the veil of confusion*), first printed in 1642.[2] The Italian missionary Stanislao Torrente (1616–1681) later published an abridged and revised version of the text under the title *Tianzhu shengjiao huoyi lun* (天主聖教豁疑論, *A clarification of doubts concerning the Holy Teaching of the Lord of Heaven*) (Hu 2007, pp. 11–12; Wen 2007, p. 9).

Pomi lun primarily expounds Catholic doctrines such as the nature of God, the immortality of the soul, and the concepts of heaven and hell, while refuting Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism. Many of its arguments and analogies are derived from Matteo Ricci's *The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven*.

Shortly thereafter, Zhu Zongyuan composed two apologetic works. *Da ke wen* (答客問, *Answering a guest's questions*), first printed in 1643 and reprinted in 1697, employs a question-and-answer format to demonstrate the superiority of Catholicism over Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religious beliefs, while also introducing fundamental Catholic doctrines and liturgical practices. *Zhengshi lüeshuo* (拯世略說, *On saving the world*), completed in 1644, serves as a complementary text. Written in a similarly discursive style, it expounds on the significance and excellence of Catholicism, systematically addressing core theological concepts such as the nature of God, Christology, anthropology, and eschatology.

These two works appear to have enjoyed considerable recognition within Chinese Catholic circles.[3] In 1702, when the Jesuit missionary François Noël (1651–1729) was dispatched to Rome to defend the Jesuit position in the Chinese Rites Controversy, the substantial collection of Chinese books he brought with him most likely included *Zhengshi lüeshuo.* This is corroborated by the fact that the *Summarium nouorum authenticorum testimoniorum* (1703), a document presented to the Pope, contained excerpts from *Zhengshi lüeshuo* and also referenced *Da ke wen* (Standaert 2012, pp. 66, 72). Copies of both works are preserved in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, being brought by Philippe Couplet in 1686. Later, François Noël brought the *Zhengshi lüeshuo* and the *Da ke wen* to the Jesuit Roman Archives (Chan 2001, pp. 191–94). In his *Philosophia Sinica* (1711), Noël quoted these two works (Meynard and Canaris 2023, pp. 367, 375).

In contrast to these three works, *On the rites of Jiao and She* stands apart: it is a short commentary composed to annotate the sentence from *Zhongyong* (中庸, *the Doctrine of the Mean*) 19.6 that states, "The rites of the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices are for serving *Shangdi*." (郊社之禮所以事上帝也) It lacks an independent title, and its date of composition remains an enigma. The essay survives in several manuscript copies, held respectively in the Bibliotheca Zi-Ka-Wei and BnF. Further, Fang Hao stated that he personally owned a version in his private collection; however, we do not know where it is now (Fang 2007, p. 296).

Although brief, the text advances a dense argument: starting from this canonical line, Zhu seeks to demonstrate that, despite their different locations and ritual forms, both *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices are directed to one and the same supreme deity, *Shangdi*, whom he identifies with the Christian God. He criticizes later ritual developments that fragmented the object of worship among heaven, earth, and a host of spirits, and instead insists on a strictly monotheistic reading of the state sacrifices.

However, the very sentence it comments on had already been made pivotal by Matteo Ricci in *The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, where Ricci cited *Zhongyong* 19.6 to argue that the Christian God is identical with the ancient *Shangdi*. Zhu's commentary can therefore be read as a Confucian Christian defence and further elaboration of Ricci's interpretation: written from within the world of late Ming–early Qing classical scholarship and ritual debates, it aims to show that Ricci's monotheistic reading of *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices is compatible with, and indeed helps to resolve, long-standing Confucian controversies over these rites.

The influence and renown of this short essay were far more limited than those of *Da ke wen* and *Zhengshi lüeshuo*. This is evident from the fact that, although *On the rites of Jiao and She* directly annotates a Chinese classical text, it was not included in the digest of documents presented to the Pope by Noël as evidence concerning Chinese rites. The copy held by BnF was perhaps brought to Paris by the French Jesuit missionary Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730).[4] Bouvet arrived in Ningbo in 1687 as one of the French "King's Mathematicians" and entered Beijing the following year. His representative work, *Gujin jingtian jian* (古今敬天鑒, *A mirror of reverence for Heaven through the ages*), includes Zhu Zongyuan's essay. It is highly probable that Bouvet read the essay during his time in Ningbo. Later, this essay, together with Bouvet's own work, was deposited in BnF, then the Royal Library, where they were assigned the shelfmarks Chinois 7144 and Chinois 7163, respectively.[5]

Both manuscripts bear the notation *Dati wenzheng* (大題文徵, collection of major topic essays) beneath their titles, while the copy in the Bibliotheca Zi-Ka-Wei even bears the cover inscription *Huiyuan zhujuan* (會元硃卷, vermilion manuscript of the top candidate in the metropolitan examination). These features suggest that the essay was likely intended as a model examination essay. Sachsenmaier, following Fang Hao's interpretation, identifies it as an examination-composition piece (Sachsenmaier 2018, p. 52). However, this assertion is subject to a number of doubts.

Although the inscription identifies the piece as a metropolitan "vermilion manuscript", no historical record confirms that Zhu Zongyuan ever sat for, let alone topped, the 1648 metropolitan examination, and the extant lists of examination questions for that year contain no such topic (Hu 2007, p. 14)[6]. Moreover, the essay departs markedly from the formal requirements of the *baguwen* (八股文, the "eight-legged" style) and, in content, openly rejects Zhu Xi's annotations, which is an exceedingly rare posture in actual examination compositions (Elman 2000, pp. 429–43). Taken together, these considerations suggest that the "metropolitan examination" framing reflects later editorial practice rather than the text's original institutional setting.

Therefore, if this short essay is not an actual imperial examination paper, the dating of its composition, inferred based on the examination schedule, becomes highly questionable. This cast a cloud of uncertainty over the exact period in which the text was written.

The extant versions of *On the rites of Jiao and She* are largely consistent in content, exhibiting only minor variations in wording. The most notable distinction lies between the printed edition, represented by the copy held in the Bibliotheca Zi-Ka-Wei, and the manuscript copies, of which the one preserved in BnF serves as the primary example.

When referring to the spirits between the humans and the divine, the manuscript versions sometimes use the term *guishen* (鬼神) and at other times *baishen* (百神), which

aligns with Zhu Zongyuan's habitual usage in his writings. For example, in *Da ke wen*, when comparing the similarities and differences between Catholicism and Confucianism, Zhu argues that the two traditions share similarities in ethical and moral teachings; where they differ, however, is that Confucianism lacks an explanation of the meaning of life—specifically, it does not discuss "the causes of life, death, and spirits" (生死鬼神之故) (Z. Zhu 2014a, p. 578). Similarly, in the preface to *Zhengshi lüeshuo*, Zhu reflects on his own contemplation of *guishen* during his search for the ultimate meaning of life (Z. Zhu 2014b, p. 194).

On the other hand, spirits involved in sacrificial and divinatory practices are also referred to as *guishen*. For instance, regarding the custom of burning paper money to honor ancestors, Zhu rhetorically asks, "Do *guishen* also accept bribes?" (Z. Zhu 2014a, p. 596) When criticizing popular sacrificial customs, he argues that the beings being worshipped are merely deceased ancestors, not the orthodox *guishen* mentioned in the classics (Z. Zhu 2014b, p. 289). In his critique of divination, he contends that the *guishen* consulted by fortune-tellers do not actually use divination outcomes to foretell fortune or misfortune (Z. Zhu 2014a, pp. 632–34).

The term *baishen* appears only once in *Da ke wen*: when discussing celestial bodies, Zhu states that after the Creator made all things, He indeed appointed guardian angels to maintain their operation. However, these guardian angels are not the stars themselves, nor do they require sacrifices; only the Creator should be worshipped, "and all spirits are encompassed within this." (而百神皆包舉乎其中矣) (Z. Zhu 2014a, p. 622). In *Zhengshi lüeshuo*, in the context of the one Creator being the sovereign ruler of heaven, earth, and all things, it is stated that "*baishen* cannot share in His duties." (Z. Zhu 2014b, p. 217). Moreover, Jesus Christ, as one person of the Trinity, is able to summon and command the *baishen* (Z. Zhu 2014b, pp. 222, 248).

It is thus evident that Zhu Zongyuan habitually used *guishen* when discussing the relationship between spirits and humans, and *baishen* when referring to the relationship between spirits and the Creator. The manuscript versions of *On the rites of Jiao and She* continue this lexical practice, stating that heaven, earth, and all things are moved and guarded by *guishen*, but these spirits do not require sacrifice; only the Creator should be worshipped, as He completely transcends the *baishen*. However, the printed edition abandons the term *guishen* and uniformly employs *baishen* throughout.

On the rites of Jiao and She draws a parallel between the rites for honoring ancestors and those for worshipping the Creator, arguing that although multiple rituals may exist for venerating ancestors, they ultimately honor the same forebears. Similarly, while *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices differ in form, they are directed toward the same Lord of Heaven. The manuscript text reads:

> If one suspects that the object of worship differs because the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices are distinct, could one likewise suspect that there are two different parents being honored on account of the variations between the *yue*, *si*, *zheng*, and *chang* sacrifices? (若因郊社不同遂疑所事有異，亦可因礿祀蒸嘗其禮不同，而疑所祀有二親哉？) (Z. Zhu 2010, p. 4)

Here, *yue* (summer sacrifice), *si* (spring sacrifice), *zheng* (winter sacrifice), and *chang* (autumn sacrifice) all refer to seasonal ancestral rites. Zhu Zongyuan's analogy is highly persuasive: just as the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices vary by location, while the *yue*, *si*, *zheng*, and *chang* differ by season, the latter undeniably honor the same ancestors. By this analogy, the former need not imply two distinct objects of worship.

The printed edition, however, replaces the phrase "*yue*, *si*, *zheng*, and *chang*" with "kowtowing, kneeling, reverence, and respect" (叩跪恭敬) (Z. Zhu 2013, p. 389), thus comparing the grand suburban sacrifice to mundane acts of daily etiquette. This substitution

significantly weakens the persuasiveness of the argument. Moreover, the claim that these everyday gestures "differ in ritual form" is conceptually puzzling.

The printed edition's avoidance of the term *guishen* and its logically incongruous replacement of the seasonal ancestral sacrifices appear to be a deliberate effort to sidestep any implication that might justify ancestral worship. This alteration was likely influenced by the escalating tensions of the Chinese Rites Controversy. As the quote above indicates, the parallels between divine worship and ritual honoring of ancestors undermines the Jesuits' position in the controversy.

In 1715, Pope Clement XI issued the papal bull *Ex Illa Die*, which strictly prohibited Chinese Christians from participating in ancestral and Confucian rites. That same year, he dispatched Carlo Ambrogio Mezzabarba (1685–1741), the Patriarch of Alexandria, to China to communicate and enforce this decree.

Upon his arrival, Mezzabarba did not immediately publicize the full prohibition. After assessing the complex local situation, he consulted with Jesuits in Beijing and drafted a set of eight concessions, known historically as the Eight Permissions of Mezzabarba (嘉樂八條). These provisions offered limited flexibility within the framework of Clement XI' decree, including explicit permission for Chinese Christians to perform kowtows before non-religious ancestral tablets. It is this very concession that likely explains why the printed edition of *On the rites of Jiao and She* replaced the classical sacrificial terms *yue*, *si*, *zheng*, and *chang* with the more generic gestures of kowtowing, kneeling, reverence, and respect[7]. However, in 1753, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome formally forbade missionaries in China from implementing Mezzabarba's Eight Permissions (T. Li 2019, pp. 48–75).

If this inference is accurate, then the printed edition of *On the rites of Jiao and She* held in the Bibliotheca Zi-Ka-Wei was likely published between 1715 and 1753—long after Zhu Zongyuan's lifetime.

However, it should be pointed out that evidence from anti-Jesuit polemics of the 1660s demonstrates that Zhu's treatise was already being deployed in intra-Catholic controversies well before the papal bull *Ex illa die* (Canaris 2024, pp. 522, 540). Yet the textual features of the Zi-Ka-Wei edition, most notably its sharpened insistence on a strict monotheistic *Shangdi* and its marginal notes aligning Zhu with post-Tridentine scholastic categories[8], point to a later editorial layer reflecting the theological climate after *Ex illa die* (Q. Li 2014, p. 48). This combination strongly suggests a post-1715 date for the Zi-Ka-Wei printing.

3. The New Interpretation

If Zhu Zongyuan's other works primarily evangelized from a Christian perspective, *On the rites of Jiao and She* approaches the interpretation of Chinese classics fundamentally from the standpoint of a Confucian scholar.

In his essay, Zhu establishes a strict monotheistic principle through the interpretation of Chinese state rituals. He argues that since cosmic sovereignty must be undivided, the *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices, despite being distinct ceremonies, must honor the same single supreme deity, i.e., *Shangdi*, the Lord of Heaven and sovereign over all other spirits. The essay opens by declaring that the Supreme Lord cannot be two (帝不可二), and that even though the *Jiao* and *She* are different rites, they are unified under the single purpose of serving *Shangdi*. Crucially, Zhu frames this not merely as a ritual claim but as a matter of logical and cosmological necessity: the sovereign of all creation is by definition singular and indivisible.

The text critiques later ritual corruptions that fragmented worship among various natural forces and deities: dividing Heaven into five directional deities, and elevating a host of heterodox spirits as arbiters of fortune and calamity. Against these distortions, Zhu posits

that Heaven and Earth are merely two great physical forms (兩大形體), devoid of spiritual consciousness and thus unworthy of direct sacrifice in their own right. The true object of worship is the conscious, omnipotent Creator and Ruler, *Shangdi*, who governs the world and bestows blessings or calamities. All natural phenomena, including the movements of sun and moon, the fecundity of water and soil, and the lesser spirits that attend to them operate entirely under His command; they are instruments of His power, not independent sources of benefit. Thus, ultimate gratitude is due to Him alone, and all ritual service must be directed accordingly.

To preempt the objection that the *Jiao* and *She* imply two distinct supreme deities, Zhu deploys a rigorous *reductio ad absurdum*. He poses a series of pointed questions:

> if there were indeed two supreme lords, would they be equal and without difference in wisdom, courage and power? Or are they unequal in greatness? In the affairs of the myriad changes of cosmos, must they consult each other before acting? Or do they each issue their own commands? Now, heaven and earth belong to and are governed by one, therefore every act of giving and every act of generating follows the natural order and responds accordingly. If each ruled his domain independently, like two monarchs dividing a territory, their acts of fostering growth and movement would not be connected. How then could the orderly succession of seasons and the flourishing of all living things be maintained? (試問此二帝者，其智勇才能均敵而無差乎？抑大小不齊乎？其間為陰陽變化之事，必相咨謀而後行乎？抑各出其號令乎？夫天地惟屬一帝搏捖，故一施一生莫不順氣而應；若各自為帝，則如兩君分域而處，其發育運動亦不相屬，何以序歲功成百物哉？) (Z. Zhu 2010, p. 4)

By demonstrating that the hypothesis of duotheism leads to logical incoherence and cosmological chaos, the argument forces the conclusion that the opposite must be true: the cosmos can only be rationally understood as under the unified, singular governance of one supreme deity. This logical maneuver powerfully reinforces the preceding doctrinal statements, transitioning from declarative faith to a reasoned defense of monotheism's necessity for cosmic order.

Following this *reductio ad absurdum* argument, Zhu proceeds to analyze the ontological implications of the Chinese term *zhizun* (至尊, the supreme lordship), he argues that the very concept of *zhizun* demands absolute singularity:

> Moreover, for the Supreme Lord, being one constitutes true supremacy, while being two results in the loss of supremacy. That is to say, if one is the supreme, the other must be a lesser one. Once they can be ranked, and thus compared, supremacy is still compromised. (且至尊之上帝，一則尊，二則失尊。即一為至尊，一為次尊。可以序，進而較，猶為失尊。) (Z. Zhu 2010, p. 4)

One is supreme; two means the loss of supremacy. Even the establishment of a primary and secondary lord would already compromise the absolute dignity that defines the Supreme Lord, for *Shangdi*'s transcendence over all spiritual beings far exceeds even the distance between a sovereign and his ministers.

The argument culminates in the rationale for the unity of the *Jiao* and *She*: while these two rites differ in their material offerings and ceremonial sites, they do not differ in the object of their service. Rather, each rite corresponds to a distinct sphere of *Shangdi*'s manifest activity (功用). The *Jiao* sacrifice responds to His virtue as expressed through Heaven, i.e., the luminous canopy that shelters all, giving thanks for "the virtue of having given birth to Heaven" (生天之德); the *She* sacrifice responds to His virtue as expressed through Earth, i.e., the deep and sustaining ground beneath, giving thanks for "the virtue of having given birth to Earth" (生地之德). As a clinching illustration, Zhu points out that the ancient kings

offered prayers for grain harvests at the *Jiao* altar rather than at the altar of the Earth Deity (后土), demonstrating that even the produce of the earth was understood as a gift originating from *Shangdi* alone. This is then analogized to performing different seasonal rites *yue*, *si*, *zheng*, and *chang* (禴祀烝嘗) for the same parents, the variation in ritual form does not imply a plurality of recipients. The emperor performs these rites on behalf of all people, while those of lesser station serve *Shangdi* through their own body and mind, affirming a unified, hierarchical cosmic order under one sovereign God.

The core of Zhu Zongyuan's argument lies in his concept of a supreme and unparalleled *Shangdi*, a notion he derives from and anchors in the ancient Chinese classics. However, whether this *Shangdi* actually commands the multitude of spirits remains ambiguously addressed in classical Confucian texts. In his essay, Zhu synthesizes ancient views by stating: "The ancients knew that only *Shangdi* created all things in the beginning; only *Shangdi* daily governs their growth and nurture; only *Shangdi* oversees the world with majestic clarity; only *Shangdi* sends down blessings and calamities" (古人知始造萬物者, 惟上帝; 日起化育者, 惟上帝; 臨下有赫者, 惟上帝; 降祥降殃者, 惟上帝). While this confirms *Shangdi*'s role as creator, sustainer, and moral judge of the world, it does not, strictly speaking, explicitly clarify within the classical corpus alone whether the multitude of spirits are subordinate to His command, nor does it unambiguously demonstrate that He is the supreme sovereign over all deities. Zhu bridges this gap by introducing his own theological synthesis: the subordinate spirits, he asserts, "all act under the command of *Shangdi*" (皆受上帝之命而行之者也), a claim that goes beyond what the Confucian classics explicitly state and points to a framework of interpretation that exceeds the classical tradition.

Zhu Zongyuan's clear conception of a supreme deity evidently does not originate solely from Confucian classics, but is fundamentally shaped by Catholic thought. He grafts the Catholic understanding of a supreme God who commands all spirits onto the ancient Chinese concept of *Shangdi*. In other words, Zhu introduces Catholic theological frameworks to resolve internal Chinese debates concerning the interpretation of the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices. The following article will demonstrate why Zhu Zongyuan's explanation represents a novel interpretation from two perspectives: firstly, compared to the traditional Chinese practice of classical commentary, his approach offers a completely new interpretation. Secondly his explanation serves as an evident expansion of the theological framework previously established by Matteo Ricci.

4. The Confucian Perspective

As mentioned above, the passage annotated by Zhu Zongyuan originates from *Zhongyong* 19.6, where the rites of the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices are discussed alongside the rites of the ancestral temple. The context of this passage focuses on elaborating the concept of filial piety (孝), which involves "the skilful carrying out of the wishes of our forefathers, and the skilful carrying forward of their undertakings" (善繼人之志，善述人之事者也) (Legge 1960, p. 402). In other words, it emphasizes the continuation of unfulfilled ambitions and the preservation of accomplished deeds of one's forebears.

The practice of filial piety is deeply embedded in ritual life, as seen in acts such as repairing the ancestral temple, displaying ritual vessels, arranging ceremonial garments, and presenting seasonal offerings (修其祖廟，陳其宗器，設其裳衣，薦其時食) (Legge 1960, p. 402). These rituals reflect a profound reverence for order, which is further connected to the principles of governance. Meanwhile, the specific deity to whom the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices were directed was not the central concern of the original text.

Throughout the history of ancient China, the rituals of the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices underwent continuous evolution and were subject to ongoing controversy. From the early worship of the Five Emperors (五帝) to the later veneration of *Houtu* and the

establishment of the northern and southern suburban sacrifices (南北郊祀), these practices evolved significantly (J. Zhang 2014, p. 9). By the Song dynasty, the central debate had developed into whether the suburban and earth-altar sacrifices should be performed as separate ceremonies or as a combined ritual (Y. Zhu 2009).

Zhu Xi (朱熹)'s *Sishu zhangju jizhu* (四書章句集註, *Collected commentaries on the four books*) served as the authoritative reference for the imperial examinations and represented the orthodox ideology of both the Ming and Qing dynasties. His annotation on *Zhongyong* 19.6 followed Zheng Xuan (鄭玄)'s interpretation: "The *Jiao* sacrifice is offered to Heaven; the *She* sacrifice is offered to Earth. The omission of *Houtu* is for conciseness." (郊祀天，社祭地。不言后土者，省文也) (X. Zhu 2016, p. 28). This provided the theoretical foundation for performing separate sacrifices to Heaven and Earth. In the early Ming dynasty, the traditional practice of conducting distinct rituals was adopted—using the *Jiao* sacrifice to worship Heaven and the *She* sacrifice to worship Earth.

In 1377, Emperor Taizu (太祖) of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋), constructed the Great Sacrificial Hall (大祀殿) on the former site of the Circular Mound Altar (圜丘) for Heaven worship. This transformed the practice into a combined worship of Heaven and Earth within the hall, thereby streamlining the ceremonial procedures while providing shelter from the elements. This reform aligned with Emperor Taizu's political orientation of "emphasizing substance over form and sincerity over ritual" (重本尚誠), rejecting mere superficial adherence to convention (Zhao 2004, p. 13). This reform was subsequently endorsed and supported by the Confucian scholar Qiu Jun (邱濬) (1420–1495). In his work *Daxue yanyi bu* (大學衍義補, *Supplement to the Great Learning*), he provided a theoretical foundation for the joint worship of Heaven and Earth.

Qiu pointed out that the practice of separate sacrifices to Heaven and Earth first appeared in *Da si yue* (大司樂, *Offices of the Music Master*) chapter of *Zhouli* (周禮, *the Rites of Zhou*), but was not recorded in other classical texts, nor was it mentioned in other chapters of *the Rites of Zhou* itself. Only in *Da zong bo* (大宗伯, *Offices of the Minister of Rites*) chapter is it mentioned that six types of jade ritual objects were used in sacrifices to Heaven, Earth, and the four directions—specifically, a blue *bi* disc for Heaven and a yellow *cong* tube for Earth. Additionally, *Dian rui* (典瑞, *Offices of the Director of Jade Rituals*) chapter notes that the *si gui you di* (四圭有邸, a single base with four conjoined gui tablets) was used for Heaven, and the *liang gui you di* (兩圭有邸, a single base with two conjoined gui tablets) for Earth. These two passages differentiate the methods of sacrifice for Heaven and Earth but do not specify the location or timing of the rituals. Only *Da si yue* chapter mentions offering sacrifices to Heaven at the Circular Mound on the winter solstice and to Earth at the Square Mound (方丘) on the summer solstice. The minister of rites was responsible for state rituals, among which the most important were the auspicious rites. Within the auspicious rites, the most significant were the sacrificial rituals, with those dedicated to Heaven and Earth being paramount. However, among the major rites overseen by the minister of rites—specifically, two of the ten auspicious rites—only the worship of *Haotian Shangdi* (昊天上帝, the Sovereign Heaven) was recorded, with no mention of *Houtu*. The distinction between the two appears only in the description of the ritual objects used. This suggests that the rites for Heaven and Earth were fundamentally the same, differing only in the ceremonial implements employed. Furthermore, in the section describing the responsibilities of the office of royal vestments, which managed the king's ceremonial attire, it is recorded that only the sacrifice to the Sovereign Heaven required a grand fur robe and a ceremonial cap, with no mention of specific attire for the sacrifice to the Earth Deity. Based on this evidence, Qiu Jun argued that Heaven and Earth were worshipped jointly, with two distinct deities but a single presiding officiant. It was precisely because there were two deities that

two different sets of ritual objects were used, and precisely because there was one officiant that only one set of ceremonial robes was specified (Qiu 1999, p. 489).

Qiu's argument for the joint worship of Heaven and Earth exemplifies the pragmatic rationality characteristic of Ming dynasty ritual studies. Through classical exegesis and historical critique, he constructed a solid scholarly foundation for the institutional reforms of the early Ming. Yet this argumentative approach, grounded in an appeal to classical authority, remained constrained by the inherent textual contradictions within the canonical sources themselves. By over relying on internal inconsistencies in the *Rites of Zhou* while neglecting the interpretive traditions formed through long-term ritual practice, his reasoning exposed the limitations of a purely text-centric methodology.

In 1530, Emperor Shizong (世宗) of the Ming dynasty reversed the early Ming system of joint worship of Heaven and Earth, reinstating the separate sacrificial rites. This restorationist reform was likewise grounded in classical precedent, emphasizing the cosmic order of "Heaven as father and Earth as mother" (父天母地) while condemning the joint worship system as "sacrilegious and immoral." (瀆而不倫) Its aim was to restore state ritual codes to the ancient models of the Three Dynasties (三代).

However, this reform constituted one facet of the political struggles during the early Jiajing (嘉靖) period known as the "Great Rites Controversy" (大禮議). Having ascended the throne from a collateral line, Emperor Shizong consistently sought to legitimize his biological father, the Prince of Xingxian (興獻王), within the imperial lineage. By overturning ancestral institutions, he not only demonstrated the monarch's absolute authority over ritual codes but also broke free from the constraints of Ming political traditions. Furthermore, the reform directly served the restructuring of the imperial ancestral temple system. In his separate worship proposal, the emperor defied opposition to replace the dual association of "Taizu and Taizong sharing the sacrifices" (太祖太宗並配) with "Taizu alone receiving associated worship" (太祖獨配) While ostensibly following the ancient rite, this actually diminished Taizong's status within *Jiao* sacrifice system, paving the way for subsequent reforms of the Imperial Ancestral Temple (Zhao 2004, pp. 14–17).

Throughout the Ming dynasty, the evolution of *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices remained intrinsically linked to the pulse of dynastic politics. Each ritual transformation—from establishing joint worship by the emperor Taizu to the Jiajing restoration of separate northern and southern suburban sacrifices—represented projections of power dynamics within the realm of ritual law. While the early Ming Taizu championed innovation under the banner of "emphasizing substance over form," the Jiajing Emperor leveraged the "Great Rites Controversy" to reconstruct the sacrificial system, transforming suburban rites into an endorsement of imperial legitimacy. During this century-long ritual transformation, Confucian scholars exhaustively debated fragments from the *Rites of Zhou* and *Liji* (禮記, *Book of Rites*). Although Qiu Jun's *Daxue yanyi bu* represented the pinnacle of textual research, it still could not escape the dual predicament of hermeneutic consistency and institutional rationality, when Zheng Xuan's commentaries conflicted with records in *Da si yue*, and Zhu Xi's collected annotations clashed with contemporary reforms, the classics themselves had become a field of interpretation fraught with tension.

It was precisely within this quagmire of classical exegesis and practical political dilemmas that the unique value of Zhu Zongyuan's *On the rites of Jiao and She* emerged. Instead of continuing the circular arguments of traditional commentators, this scholar from Ningbo introduced entirely new intellectual resources from Catholic theology. Employing the theological concept of a supreme and unparalleled deity, he constructed a transcendental connection between the Confucian Sovereign Heaven and the Catholic one true God. By subsuming heaven and earth under one supreme deity and directing both *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices to the same supreme object of worship, the centuries-old debate between separate

and joint worship was fundamentally resolved at the ontological level. This interpretation neither deviated from the classical passage, while simultaneously endowing the concept of *Shangdi* with new dimensions of exclusivity and personhood through Catholic theology.

5. The Catholic Perspective

The first Catholic missionary to address the rites of *Jiao* and *She* was Matteo Ricci. In his *The true meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, he directly criticized Zhu Xi, said:

> Quoting Confucius, *Zhongyong* says: "The ceremonies of sacrifices to heaven and earth are meant for the service of the Sovereign on High." Zhu Xi comments that the failure to mention Sovereign Earth was for the sake of brevity. In my humble opinion, what Confucius intended to say was that what is single cannot be described dualistically. How could he have been seeking merely for brevity of expression? (Ricci 2016, p. 97)

Zhu Xi's "brevity" argument was grounded in the historical practice of *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices, whereas Ricci's critique drew directly from the literal meaning of the classical text. This approach aligns with Ricci's accommodation strategy of embracing ancient Confucianism while rejecting its later Neo-Confucian interpretations. However, Ricci's focus was fundamentally different from that of Zhu Zongyuan. His primary aim was not to resolve the specific controversy surrounding the suburban rites, but rather to cite this passage from *Zhongyong* in support of his famous assertion: "Our Lord of Heaven is the Sovereign on High mentioned in the ancient canonical writings" (吾天主，乃古經書所稱上帝也) (Ricci 2016, p. 96).

In other words, Ricci used the classics to prove the existence of the Christian God, whereas Zhu used the concept of God to reinterpret the classics. Having accepted Ricci's fundamental identification, how then should one understand those elements in the ancient classics that appear incompatible with a strict monotheistic framework? This question was particularly pressing regarding the complex sacrificial system, exemplified by *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices. From a Catholic perspective, if the Lord of Heaven is the sovereign ruler of all creation, supreme and without equal, why would such a multitude of diverse sacrificial rituals be necessary?

In *Da ke wen*, Zhu poses the question: What was the original intention behind the establishment of sacrifices by the ancients? The text cites *Zhongyong* 19.6 and explains: Both the sacrifices to Heaven and to Earth were established to repay the profound grace of the Lord. The rites of the Altars of Soil and Grain (社稷), in turn, were to repay the benevolent influence of the grains essential for our nourishment—serving the deities where their meritorious functions are manifested. Later generations mistakenly identified the Millet deity (稷) as *Houji* 后稷, a minister under Emperors Yao 堯 and Shun 舜. The celebration of the Five Sacrifices at the locations of the hearth (奧), stove (灶), gate (門), and eaves (溜) was based on the belief that these places were guarded by spirits. Although the ancient kings were simple and unadorned, they should not be considered so foolish as to believe this literally. Rather, this practice signifies that the Lord is omnipresent, and there is no one under heaven who should not serve Him. However, the rituals for serving the Lord must vary according to one's social rank. Thus, the Emperor serves the Lord through the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth; the feudal lords serve Him through sacrifices to the mountains and rivers; while the ministers and scholars serve Him through sacrifices at the hearth, stove, gate, and eaves (Z. Zhu 2014a, p. 494).

The text discusses three types of sacrificial rites: those to Heaven and Earth, those at the Altars of Soil and Grain, and the Five sacrifices. While these rituals were traditionally intended as worship directed toward Heaven, Earth, the Millet Deity, the Door God, the

Hearth God, and other such entities, Zhu rejects this interpretation. Grounded in fundamental Christian doctrine, he reinterprets all sacrifices as forms of serving the one God.

To reconcile this monotheistic principle with the evident diversity of Chinese sacrificial practices—and thereby justify the existence of this complex ritual culture—he advances two key explanations. First, these sacrifices are performed at the specific locations where God's benevolent power and meritorious deeds are manifested, serving Him precisely where His grace is actively discerned. Second, drawing upon the Confucian framework of social hierarchy, he argues that the manner of serving God must differ according to one's social rank and status, necessitating these varied ritual forms.

The first explanation finds a parallel in the veneration of angels and saints within Catholicism. Christians honor angels and saints without equating them with God, recognizing that God is the source of all their merits and that veneration ultimately directs back to the worship of God. The distinction between latria (the worship owed to God alone) and dulia (the veneration offered to saints and angels) has roots in the Second Council of Nicaea (787) and was systematized by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. The Council of Trent reaffirmed this scholastic distinction in 1563, while affirming the legitimacy of both practices (Sun 2024).

The second explanation bears a distinctly Chinese character in its alignment of specific sacrificial practices with different levels of the social hierarchy. In *Zhengshi lüeshuo*, Zhu further elaborates on this point, saying:

> Some may argue that the rites of serving Heaven are reserved solely for the emperor, contending that even feudal lords dare not usurp them, let alone common people. What they fail to understand is that what is considered usurpation refers only to *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices. How could God forbid anyone from bowing in prayer or crying out to Him in times of suffering and hardship? Even in the present day, on occasions such as the New Year or during significant life events like marriages—whether auspicious or ominous—people of all statuses, high or low, invariably reverence Heaven first. How could this be deemed usurpation? (Z. Zhu 2014b, p. 218)

In ancient China, worship of Heaven was a symbol of status, wherein only the Son of Heaven, i.e., the emperor was permitted to perform the suburban sacrifice. Any such rites conducted by others were considered an act of usurpation. When missionaries interpreted the Chinese concept of Heaven as a personal God and called for universal worship of the Lord of Heaven, a clash emerged between canonical law and imperial authority. The passage from *Zhengshi lüeshuo* represents Zhu's response to this dilemma. He interpreted both the grand ceremonies held at specific times and places and the daily reverence for Heaven as forms of serving the Lord of Heaven. Thus, while affirming the exclusive status of the Son of Heaven in performing the state sacrificial rites, he simultaneously resolved the dilemma of usurpation for ordinary people worshipping Heaven, thereby harmonizing religious practice with social hierarchy.

The interpretation of *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices aligns with the first explanation, as both were rituals performed exclusively by the Son of Heaven, thus involving no distinction in social hierarchy. The differences in timing, location, and ceremonial vessels were based solely on the different manifestations of His work (功用) (Z. Zhu 2014a, p. 494). In *On the rites of Jiao and She*, Zhu employed traditional Confucian discourse to extol the virtues of Heaven and Earth—a point which Zhang Xiaolin cites as evidence of Zhu's fundamentally Confucian standpoint (X. Zhang 2023, p. 11). However, unlike traditional Confucians, Zhu offered this praise from a divine perspective, recognizing Heaven and Earth as manifestations of the Lord of Heaven's power and grace.

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However, when explaining the practice of *Jiao* and *She*, Zhu also addressed the question of how commoners might legitimately worship the Lord of Heaven, given that the imperial suburban sacrifices were the exclusive prerogative of the Son of Heaven. He noted: "From the supreme ruler down to commoners, while none may employ the Son of Heaven's rites to serve the Lord, each may serve Him with mind and body." (太上而降，不得用天子之禮以事帝，而各得以身心事帝) (Z. Zhu 2010). This statement does not dissolve the hierarchical structure of ritual practice, but rather works within it: the *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices remain the Son of Heaven's exclusive domain, while commoners are accorded a distinct but equally valid mode of worship. This is analogous to the Catholic distinction between the celebration of the Mass, reserved for ordained priests, and the worship of God available to all the faithful: the difference is one of ritual form, not of the sincerity or legitimacy of devotion. Zhu insists that the hierarchical differentiation of ritual forms does not create a hierarchical differentiation in access to the divine, and all people, regardless of social rank, may direct their worship to the same supreme *Shangdi*.

6. Conclusions

On the rites of Jiao and She stands as a representative work that employs Christian theology to address traditional exegetical issues. Taking *Zhongyong* 19.6 as his starting point, Zhu Zongyuan reinterpreted the ritual significance of *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices. By introducing the Catholic concept of a strictly monotheistic God, he demonstrated that despite differences in form, location, and offerings between *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices, their object was the one supreme *Shangdi*—identified with the Catholic Lord of Heaven. This interpretation not only resolved the long-standing Confucian debate between "separate sacrifices" and "joint sacrifice," but also unified the object of worship at an ontological level, restoring *Jiao* and *She* sacrifices to the worship of the one true God. We can notice that Zhu's rejection of separate worship under Jiajing finds an echo in François Noël's *Philosophica Sinica*, which explicitly condemns Jiajing's ritual reform. Also, Noël attributes this reform to his polytheistic tendencies, being influenced by Buddhism and Daoism (Meynard and Canaris 2023, p. 329).

Zhu's approach did not simply impose Catholic doctrine onto Confucian texts; rather, writing as a Confucian scholar, he utilized Catholic theological resources to address theoretical dilemmas within the Confucian tradition. This methodology makes *On the rites of Jiao and She* a rare and exemplary case among Chinese Christian texts of the Ming-Qing period: its purpose was not evangelization, but active participation in the construction of Confucian academic discourse, thereby forming within the Chinese scholarly tradition an independent lineage that integrated Catholic theology with Confucian classical learning. The distinctive feature of this lineage was its simultaneous adherence to core Catholic doctrines and respect for the traditional framework of Confucian classics, demonstrating the flexibility and creativity of the Chinese scholarly tradition in absorbing foreign ideas.

As a cultural intermediary, Zhu exemplified the proactive role and creative synthesis achieved by Chinese intellectuals during the early globalization of the Ming-Qing transition. Specifically, through his writings and practice, Zhu constructed a mode of existence and thought characterized by dual identity. He was both a devout Catholic Christian, receiving baptism and actively participating in missionary activities, and a traditional Confucian scholar, succeeding in the imperial examinations and thoroughly versed in the classics. This identity enabled him to move fluidly between both cultures, not merely passively receiving the wave of Catholic globalization but actively integrating global knowledge into local life and scholarly practice. In *On the rites of Jiao and She*, he not only resolved a Confucian ritual controversy but also creatively grafted the Catholic concept of God onto the

Confucian concept of *Shangdi*, endowing the ancient *Shangdi* with transcendence, personhood, and uniqueness, thereby enriching the Confucian worldview.

Furthermore, Zhu's thought embodies a localization strategy and rational harmonization within Sino-Western cultural exchange. When explaining the sacrificial system, he adhered to monotheistic principles while simultaneously respecting the hierarchical structure of Chinese society. In summary, Zhu Zongyuan and his *On the rites of Jiao and She* represent a peak in the localization of Catholicism in late Ming and early Qing China. His case not only reveals the Chinese voice within the process of Catholic globalization but also demonstrates the openness and creativity exhibited by the Chinese scholarly tradition when confronted with foreign culture.

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Notes

1 Regarding his exact year of birth, Fang Hao 方豪 estimated that Zhu was born in 1609 based on the statement in *Da ke wen* (答客問) that "Western scholars have only come to China for fifty years." In contrast, Gong Yingyan 龔纓晏, citing evidence from Zhang Nengxin's (張能信) preface stating that "Master Zhu completed this work at the age of twenty-three," argued that he was likely born in 1617 or slightly earlier. Sachsenmaier, however, places his birth in 1616 (Wang 2010, p. 96).

2 The work is held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) under the shelfmark Chinois 7143.

3 The *Da ke wen* was also used by the Franciscan Antonio de Santa Maria Caballero (Canaris 2024, p. 522).

4 However, in the 1742 catalogue of the Chinese books in the BnF by Fourmont, there is no mention of *On the rites of Jiao and She*; Bouvet may have brought the *On the rites of Jiao and She*, which was kept in Jesuit libraries, and later joined the BnF.

5 The manuscript Chinois 7163 in the BnF is titled *Zaowuzhu zhenlun: gujin jingtian jian* (造物主真論: 古今敬天鑒). This particular version differs from other editions held in the BnF collections (Q. Li 2014, pp. 47–49).

6 According to historical records, the three questions for the Zhejiang (浙江) provincial examination (鄉試) in the fifth year of the Shunzhi reign (1648) were drawn from the "Yan Yuan and Ji Lu" (顏淵季路) chapter of the *Analects*, the phrase "to perfect oneself is benevolence, to perfect things is wisdom" (成己仁也, 成物知也) from the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the phrase "to nourish men with goodness" (以善養人) from the *Mencius*. The questions for the metropolitan examination (會試) in the next year were drawn from the "inscription on the bathing tub of Tang" (湯之盤銘) chapter of the *Great Learning*, the phrase "all under heaven would turn to benevolence" (天下歸仁焉) from the *Analects*, and the phrase "preserve one's mind and nourish one's nature" (存其心養其性) from the *Mencius* (Huang and Zhao 2002, pp. 28–30).

7 It could also reflect the influence of the 1656 decree. However, in contrast to the strict measures of 1715, the 1656 decree was relatively lenient. It provided room for Chinese Christians to participate in Chinese rites and aligned more closely with the position held by the Jesuits.

8 *Da ke wen* and *Zhengshi lüeshuo* were reprinted at the end of the seventeenth century without any comparable alterations: the term *guishen* is consistently retained in both works across their known versions, which suggests that the wholesale suppression of *guishen* in the Zi-Ka-Wei printed edition of *On the rites of Jiao and She* represents a distinct and more intensive phase of editorial intervention. And, the printed edition contains, alongside *On the rites of Jiao and She*, a revised version of *Pomi lun* which exhibits a parallel pattern of deliberate emendation: the terms *tian* 天 and *Shangdi* 上帝 are systematically replaced with *Tianzhu* 天主, and most strikingly, Ricci's foundational equation "the Lord of Heaven is *Shangdi*" (Tianzhuzhehe? *Shangdi* ye. 天主者何? 上帝也.) is revised to read "as the scriptures say, *Di* is the master of Heaven." (ru shu suoyun *Di* zhe, tian zhi zhuzai 如書所云帝者，天之主宰), a reformulation that severs rather than affirms the identification of *Shangdi* with the Christian God.

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