

Reciprocal Interaction between Guanxue and Catholicism in Shaanxi during the Ming-Qing Transition

Shumin Ma

Shandong Vocational University of Foreign Affairs, Weihai 264504, Shandong, China

Abstract: *Guanxue, originating in Meixian County, Shaanxi, was a regional Neo-Confucian school founded by Zhang Zai and developed during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, primarily active in the Guanzhong region. Reaching new heights in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Guanxue engaged in theoretical exploration while deeply integrating with the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang schools, maintaining its tradition of practicing ritual teachings, synthesizing knowledge, and upholding moral integrity. With the introduction of Catholicism into Shaanxi, an inevitable collision and interaction occurred between Guanxue and Catholicism. This article focuses on Guanxue scholars such as Wang Zheng and Wen Xiangfeng as representative figures. By analyzing their religious doctrines and behaviors, it demonstrates the bidirectional interaction between Shaanxi Guanxue and Catholic religious thought during the late Ming and early Qing periods*

Keywords: Shaanxi Guanxue, Catholicism, Wang Zheng, Wen Xiangfeng.

1. Introduction

Guanxue, originating in Meixian County, Shaanxi, was a regional Neo-Confucian school founded by Zhang Zai and developed during the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, primarily active in the Guanzhong region, also known as Guanzhong Neo-Confucianism. Reaching new heights in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Guanxue engaged in theoretical exploration while deeply integrating with the Cheng-Zhu and Lu-Wang schools, maintaining its tradition of practicing ritual teachings, synthesizing knowledge, and upholding moral integrity. With the introduction of Catholicism into Shaanxi, an inevitable collision and interaction occurred between Guanxue and Catholicism. This article focuses on Guanxue scholars such as Wang Zheng and Wen Xiangfeng as representative figures. By analyzing their religious doctrines and behaviors, it demonstrates the bidirectional interaction between Shaanxi Guanxue and Catholic religious thought during the late Ming and early Qing periods.

2. The Product of Convergence: The “Revering Heaven and Loving Others” Heavenly Learning

Wang Zheng (1571-1644), styled Liangfu, known as Kuixin, and taking the Christian name Philip after conversion to Catholicism, later self-styled as Zhiliso and Liaoyizi, and posthumously honored as Duanjie Xiansheng by scholars, was a native of Jingyang County, Xi'an Prefecture, Shaanxi. Deeply influenced by Confucianism from childhood, he constantly pondered the fundamental question of “what Heaven has ordained for me” and how to achieve the state of moral cultivation described by Mencius: “have no shame before Heaven nor disgrace before men.” He later obtained the book *Qi Ke* (Seven Victories), a gift from a friend. *Qi Ke* was written by Diego de Pantoja, a Spanish missionary. Reading *Qi Ke* greatly inspired Wang Zheng, who considered it the guideline for achieving his state of “no shame or disgrace.” This began his connection with Catholicism.

Influenced by Pantoja, Wang Zheng later accepted baptism. After his baptism, significant changes occurred in his faith and thought. He believed Catholicism and Confucianism shared the same origin and could be integrated and mutually complementary. Drawing on both Confucian doctrine and Catholic thought, he gradually formed his unique concept of “Revering Heaven and Loving Others” (Wei Tian Ai Ren).

“The ‘Revering Heaven and Loving Others’ doctrine is primarily concentrated in the work *Wei Tian Ai Ren Ji Lun* (Treatise on the Ultimate Principle of Revering Heaven and Loving Others). This work, comprising one volume, was completed and published in the summer of the first year of the Chongzhen reign (1628). It marks the formal establishment of Wang Zheng’s syncretic Confucian-Christian doctrine of ‘Revering Heaven and Loving Others.’ Six years later, in the seventh year of Chongzhen (1634), Wang Zheng’s *Ren Hui Yue* (Articles of the Benevolence Society), also in one volume, was published. This work provided an important supplement to his ‘Revering Heaven and Loving Others’ doctrine.” The “Revering Heaven and Loving Others” doctrine both reconstructed the traditional Confucian concepts of “Heaven’s Mandate” (Tianming) and “Soul and Spirit” (Hunpo), inherited the basic framework of Confucian “Benevolence” (Ren) ethics, and simultaneously integrated the fundamental spirit of the Catholic “Ten Commandments.” Its content can be divided into “Revering Heaven,” “Loving Others,” and the relationship between the two.

First, concerning “Revering Heaven.” For Wang Zheng, “Revering Heaven” had two meanings: one was revering Heaven’s Mandate; the other was revering the Lord of Heaven (God). Regarding “revering Heaven’s Mandate,” he stated in *Wei Tian Ai Ren Ji Lun*: “Alas! Only now do I begin to know where Heaven’s Mandate lies; only now do I know that Heaven’s Mandate is truly unfailing; only now do I know that Heaven’s Mandate is truly to be revered.”[1] This passage shows Wang Zheng’s deep belief in the Confucian concept of “Heaven’s Mandate,” emphasizing particularly the “reverence” for it. “Revering Heaven’s Mandate” was derived from Confucius’s proposition that “the superior man stands in

awe of Heaven's ordinances." Simultaneously, combining this with the early Confucian classics' notion that "Heaven" or "Shangdi" (Supreme Emperor) could "bestow blessings and send down calamities," he proposed that knowing Heaven's Mandate is the prerequisite for revering it. The essence of "knowing Heaven's Mandate" lies in recognizing the existence of the "Lord of Heaven" (Tianzhu) in Heaven, who is also the "Ordainer" possessing the function of "bestowing blessings and sending down calamities." Proving the existence of God was the key issue Wang Zheng needed to argue, and the second meaning of "Revering Heaven," "Revering the Lord of Heaven," addressed this crucial problem. Regarding "revering the Lord of Heaven," he explained that the reason for "revering Heaven's Mandate" was because Heaven possesses the power to reward and punish, and the "Heaven" that exercises this power is not the natural sky, but the personal deity "Lord of Heaven." Wang Zheng used the existence of earthly rulers and their power to "reward and punish" in the human world to prove the existence of God and His power to "reward and punish" all things. The rewards and punishments of earthly rulers are fearsome. Since God possesses "greater rewards and punishments" than any earthly ruler, He is "even more to be feared." Wang Zheng's perplexity regarding the concept of "Heaven's Mandate" was finally resolved here.

Second, concerning "Loving Others." Wang Zheng believed that the essence of Catholic doctrine was "benevolence" (ren). He said: "The Catholic doctrine transmitted by the Western scholars is profound in principle and substantial in meaning; its great purport is wholly ren. The practice of ren through love has two aspects: one is to love the Lord of Heaven above all things, the other is to love others as oneself." [2] Wang Zheng summarized the core of Catholic doctrine as "ren." However, the "ren" here differed from the Confucian "ren." "Fan Chi asked about benevolence. The Master said: 'It is to love all men.'" [3] The Confucian "loving others" was based on blood relations, manifested concretely as loving parents and brothers, extending to love for the ruler and others. Wang Zheng's "loving others," in contrast, emphasized primarily the love for the supreme Lord of Heaven. In short, Wang Zheng's "loving others" was not the Confucian "benevolent love" (ren'ai) based on blood ties, but stressed love for the absolute and sole deity, God, on a religious level. For Wang Zheng, "loving others" meant first loving God, and then loving other people, with love for God placed above love for all creatures.

Finally, regarding the relationship between "Revering Heaven" and "Loving Others." In Wang Zheng's view, loving God and loving others are inseparable; they represent a bidirectional interactive relationship. Wang Zheng said: "However, truly loving the Lord of Heaven must arise from reverence born of awe, and from reverence arises love... The effect of loving the Lord of Heaven is most sincerely manifested in loving others." [4] The progression from awe of God to reverence for God and then to love for God is a natural process. Furthermore, Wang Zheng stated: "Those who truly know to revere Heaven's Mandate will naturally love the Lord of Heaven; those who truly can love the Lord of Heaven will naturally be able to love others. However, one must truly and sincerely exert the effort to fully realize the heart of loving others, only then is it true love for the Lord of Heaven." [5] To revere

Heaven's Mandate is to love God; to love others is to love God; to love God is to love others. In summary, both "Revering Heaven" and "Loving Others" share a common object of worship: the Lord of Heaven (God).

In conclusion, nurtured by Confucian doctrine, Wang Zheng identified the perplexity within the Confucian concept of "Heaven's Mandate," namely the fundamental question of "what Heaven has ordained for me," but long struggled to find an answer. The advent of Catholicism resolved this perplexity in Wang Zheng's mind. Diego de Pantoja was the key figure influencing Wang Zheng's thought. Wang Zheng's connection with Catholicism began through Qi Ke and Pantoja; later, influenced by Pantoja, he accepted baptism. Under the influence of Catholicism, Wang Zheng constructed a new concept of "Heaven's Mandate," highlighting the supreme status of "God," and thereby created his syncretic Confucian-Christian doctrine of "Revering Heaven and Loving Others." This reflects the positive response of Guanxue scholars, represented by Wang Zheng, to Catholic religious thought.

3. Guanxue Scholars' Critique and Summary of Catholicism

Within the framework of his "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" doctrine, Wang Zheng deeply and systematically elaborated a relatively complete new theory reconciling Confucianism and Christianity, which discussed almost all the main theological points propagated by Jesuit missionaries in China during the late Ming. Regarding his "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" doctrine, the author has not yet found any contemporary critiques from Guanxue scholars. However, Wang Zheng's work *Wei Tian Ai Ren Ji Lun* contains a debate between Wang Zheng and a guest. Through this debate, we can roughly analyze the criticisms and doubts raised by Confucian scholars of the time towards the "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" theory. The debate primarily centered on the "concept of the soul." The guest posed the following four questions targeting Wang Zheng's doctrine:

Do Heaven and Hell truly exist? Is their existence affirmed because they have been seen with one's own eyes?

Doing good is to gain benefits and avoid harms in this life. Why discuss the benefits and harms of the afterlife?

Confucianism teaches that after death, the hun (ethereal soul) and po (corporeal soul) ultimately disperse and return to the earth. Even if there is true bliss, how can it be enjoyed?

Assuming Heaven and Hell are real and the soul is immortal, how does one act to ascend to Heaven and avoid falling into Hell?

In response, Wang Zheng devoted extensive argumentation to proving the "immortality of the soul" and proposed a hierarchical classification of souls. There are three grades of souls in the world: the lowest grade is the "vegetative soul" (shenghun); the middle grade is the "sensitive soul" (juehun); the highest grade is the "rational soul" (linghun), which is the human soul. Specifically, animals and plants only possess po (corporeal soul/spirit), not hun (ethereal soul). The po

disperses and returns to earth as the physical form decays, but the hun remains constant and indestructible. Therefore, although the human body dies and the po disperses back to earth, the hun does not vanish with death; it endures eternally. Wang Zheng's argument for the "immortality of the soul" was constructed by reinterpreting the traditional Confucian concepts of hun and po while incorporating the Catholic concept of the soul, resulting in a "soul concept" with Confucian characteristics. Having resolved the crucial issue of "human soul immortality," questions concerning "the existence of Heaven and Hell" and "the benefits and harms of the afterlife" were readily addressed.

Besides the critique and synthesis surrounding Wang Zheng's syncretic theory, Guanxue figures like Ma Dunruo and Wen Xiangfeng also raised critiques against Catholic thought. Ma Dunruo held deep suspicions towards "the West" (Taixi). He believed that "the West" intentionally denigrated Confucianism, denied that China "had no Heaven or King," defamed sages and deities, and held the deities recorded in Chinese sacrificial rites, human relations and rites of propriety, and the cultural traditions passed down through the Thirteen Classics in contempt, even deliberately slandering them. Notably, Ma Dunruo had already keenly perceived that Catholic doctrine challenged China's traditional ethical norms and teachings (gangchang mingjiao).

Wen Xiangfeng believed Catholicism plagiarized Buddhism and that both, upon entering China, severely hindered the development of Confucianism. As stated in his work *He Fen Jiao* (Teaching of Hefen): "Those who obstruct its mandate and rebel against it are traitorous sons, such as the followers of Buddhism down to today's Western religion... [The Western theory plagiarizes Buddhism and steals from Confucianism, saying: 'I am Heaven'... Therefore, they turn their backs on the Six Classics, judge Confucius, slight the Three Kings (legendary sage rulers), criticize former sages, insult Heaven and Earth, and destroy human relations. Thus, Buddhism is the chief culprit, and Western religion is its accomplice.]"[6] Starting from the traditional Confucian "serving Heaven" (shi tian) doctrine and pursuing the ideal state of "the learning of the sages" (shengren zhi xue), which "centers solely on serving Heaven," he regarded Buddhism and Catholicism as heterodox doctrines, aiming to "sweep away heterodox doctrines and establish human relations." [7] Wen Xiangfeng saw Buddhism as the primary culprit and Catholicism as an exacerbating force, dealing a heavy blow to the Confucian ethical system. Therefore, to safeguard Confucian thought and its ethical system and uphold the "teaching of the sages," it was necessary to "vigorously reject the religion coming from the West."

In summary, Guanxue scholars' critiques of Catholicism fell into two main camps: one targeted Wang Zheng's "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" doctrine as a proxy for Catholicism, focusing critiques around his argument for "soul immortality"; the other, represented by Wen Xiangfeng and Ma Dunruo, expressed rejection, doubt, and critique towards Catholicism itself. The critiques by Wen Xiangfeng and Ma Dunruo primarily stemmed from the standpoint of the Confucian "serving Heaven" doctrine, perceiving Catholicism as a threat to Confucianism's status. In essence, the critiques by renowned Guanxue scholars of Catholicism

revolved around the bidirectional interactive relationship between Confucianism and Catholicism.

4. The Impact and Response between Shaanxi Guanxue and Catholicism

By the late Ming and early Qing, Catholic influence had spread to various provinces, and traditional Confucian ethical norms were being undermined. How to respond to this "intellectual crisis" and reconstruct a new ethical system was a pressing question for many Confucian scholars of the time. Faced with the incursion of Catholicism, the renowned Guanxue scholars Wang Zheng and Wen Xiangfeng exhibited two diametrically opposed reactions. Wang Zheng accepted baptism and became a Catholic, creating the syncretic "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" doctrine under Catholicism's influence. Wen Xiangfeng, however, harbored hostility and deep distrust towards Catholicism, and stimulated by Catholicism and other factors, constructed a Confucian religious system centered on "Revering Heaven and Becoming a Sage" (Zun Tian Zuo Sheng). This section will focus on the thoughts, doctrines, and actions of Wang Zheng and Wen Xiangfeng to elucidate the impact and response between Shaanxi Guanxue and Catholicism.

Wang Zheng, a Confucian scholar and Catholic, embodied the contradictions and conflicts arising from his dual identity, serving as a typical example of the bidirectional interaction between Shaanxi Guanxue and Catholicism. As a baptized scholar-official, he believed Catholicism and Confucianism were complementary. His "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" doctrine essentially used Catholic theology to supplement and harmonize with Confucianism, aiming to revive Confucianism and resolve the contemporary intellectual crisis. Wang Zheng viewed Catholicism and Confucianism as sharing the same origin and strenuously sought to blend them into his "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" doctrine. Although his theory faced criticism, it maintained an overall harmony. However, when it came to concrete actions, the fundamental contradictions between Confucianism and Christianity became glaringly apparent.

First, regarding the issue of continuing the family line, Wang Zheng initially chose to take a concubine. Later, realizing this was not the only solution, he adopted a nephew to avoid conflict. Second, when faced with the brutal reality of Li Zicheng capturing Xi'an and the fall of the Ming dynasty, he resolutely chose to starve himself to death to fulfill his duty of loyalty (jin jie). Both taking a concubine and committing suicide directly violated Catholic doctrine (the Ten Commandments). When his identities as a Confucian scholar and a Catholic conflicted, Wang Zheng ultimately chose to return to his Confucian roots. Wang Zheng's "Revering Heaven and Loving Others" thought and his final "suicide for loyalty" exemplify distinct Guanxue characteristics. His syncretic thought reflects the openness and inclusiveness inherent in Guanxue: "Guanxue scholars adhere to tradition but are not confined by it; they adapt to the times, constantly integrating and synthesizing academic thought, possessing distinct characteristics of openness and inclusiveness." [8] Furthermore, his "suicide for loyalty" is a marked manifestation of the Guanxue emphasis on moral integrity (qi jie): "Most Guanxue scholars paid attention to cultivating

their conduct and strengthening scholarly integrity, characterized by not flattering the powerful and not being casual towards the world.”[9] The relationship between Guanxue and Catholicism—involving mutual accommodation, transformation, and even integration, alongside mutual contradiction, challenge, and intense conflict—was vividly displayed in Wang Zheng’s life.

Wen Xiangfeng was a Guanxue scholar in the late Ming who attempted, and successfully created, a Confucian religious system centered on “Revering Heaven and Becoming a Sage.” When Catholicism spread into Shaanxi, he expressed strong dissatisfaction and distrust towards it. This aspect was analyzed in the previous section and will not be repeated here. The focus now will be on Wen Xiangfeng’s response to the challenge posed by Catholicism, providing a preliminary analysis of his “Revering Heaven and Becoming a Sage” Confucian religious system.

Wen Xiangfeng possessed an original intellectual system. His works reflect a “Confucian religion” (Rujiao) system based on the fundamental tenets of “Serving Heaven and Honoring Confucius” (Shi Tian Zun Kong), “Revering Heaven and Becoming a Sage” (Zun Tian Zuo Sheng), and “Inner Sageliness and Outer Kingliness” (Nei Sheng Wai Wang). Among these, “Serving Heaven and Honoring Confucius” and “Revering Heaven and Becoming a Sage” were his primary intellectual aims. In the Confucian religious system Wen Xiangfeng constructed, Confucius was the representative on earth of the highest deity, God (Shangdi). His deification of Confucius was likely intended to counter the Catholic claim that Jesus was the only Son of God.

The most distinctive and unique feature of Wen Xiangfeng’s works is the “Confucian religion” system they embody. His treatises and poems are replete with religious terms like “Heaven” (Tian), “Emperor/God” (Di), “spirits” (guishen), and contain explicit religious content such as “Heaven and Hell are definitely real,” “Spirits are the officials of Heaven,” and “Heaven has an Emperor who is the father of all living beings.” For example, in his work *Nan Guo Jiang Lu* (Southern Kingdom Lectures), he states: “Wind, clouds, thunder, and rain are qi; there are spirits governing this qi. The sun, moon, and stars are light; there are spirits governing this light. Famous mountains and great rivers are form; there are spirits governing these forms. In sum, they receive their mandate from Heaven, and Heaven truly has an Emperor, who is the father of all living beings. Therefore, I say: Scholars should dispel the ‘three denials.’ One must not say, ‘Heaven has no Emperor’; absolutely must not say, ‘Those who receive Heaven’s mandate have no spirits’; absolutely must not say, ‘Man dies and has no consciousness.’ To know the root means to know this. To know the root and reach the ultimate means to know Heaven.”[10] For Wen Xiangfeng, wind, clouds, thunder, rain; the sun, moon, stars; famous mountains and great rivers—all have spirits governing them. Heaven has an Emperor (Di), who is the father of all things. Those who receive Heaven’s mandate have spirits. All this constitutes a distinct “polytheistic” religious philosophy, directly reflecting the unique religious concepts in Wen Xiangfeng’s thought. Furthermore, he wrote: “Spirits (guishen) are the officials of Heaven. Although there are distinctions between heavenly spirits (tianshen), earthly spirits (dizhi), and human spirits

(rengui), in reality, ghosts (gui) are the soldiers and followers of spirits (shen).”[11] Ghosts are the soldiers of spirits. Here, a hierarchical pantheon (shenpu) begins to appear.

Overall, the Guanxue scholar Wen Xiangfeng responded actively to the challenge of Catholicism. He expended great effort to construct a “Confucian religion” system from pre-Qin Confucian traditions. Moreover, his “Confucian religion” system was quite mature and complete. Elements of religious experience and belief systems are evident throughout Wen Xiangfeng’s writings. Due to space limitations, this will not be detailed here.

Faced with the challenges of Western learning’s introduction, the Ming-Qing dynastic transition, the perceived “end” of Neo-Confucianism (Lixue), and the impact of popular religions on Confucianism, the inherent limitations of traditional Confucianism became starkly apparent. At this point, the “transformation of Confucianism” (Ruxue zhuanxing) became the core demand of scholars seeking a way to save the world. Therefore, whether it was Wang Zheng, who accepted Catholic baptism, or Ma Dunruo and Wen Xiangfeng, who strongly opposed Catholicism, their original intention was the same: the benefit of their own nation (culture). They all sought to rescue the intellectual crisis of their time, jointly promote the development of Guanxue, thereby save Confucianism in crisis, open a new path for its development, and ultimately revive Confucianism and uphold its orthodox status.

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