

SHANGDI: THE CHINESE DEUS

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<https://doi.org/10.15664/th.v2023i1.2614>

“Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel unto every creature” (Mark 16:15 KJV). The Great Commission of the New Testament defined Christianity as a proselytising religion from its conception. Also central to the Christian worldview is the monotheistic belief in an omnipotent and omniscient God, which is effortlessly rendered without much controversy in most European languages as cognates of the Latin *Deus* or conceptual equivalents, such as the English “God”. However, the Jesuits of the early sixteenth century found themselves in a conundrum upon arriving in China as the first ever European mission when they encountered an ancient culture possessing a wealth of religious traditions, yet with no word that would obviously accommodate all the meanings and connotations of “God” as understood by Christianity.

Matteo Ricci, the leading Jesuit missionary and arguably the prototypical sinologist, believed that the solution lay in the adoption of the indigenous term *Shangdi* (上帝), a term that is commonplace in the Chinese Classics. This became known as the “term question”,¹ a debate surrounding whether existing concepts and terminology in a non-biblical culture could be used in Biblical and doctrinal translations to express the idea of the creator God in the biblical sense. The missionaries against this solution pointed out that the failure of the only previous Christian mission into China, led by Alopen of the Nestorian Church in 635, was attributed partially to the excessive borrowing from Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian terminology to expound biblical truths such as sin and salvation.² The Nestorians went so far as to appropriate the term *arhat* (one who has achieved *nirvana* according to Buddhism) for the Christian God, causing Christianity to be confused in China as merely a school of Buddhism and eventually condemning it to obscurity. Some of Ricci’s contemporaries in Europe were also quick to criticise the choice as compromising Christianity’s essential truths and even as idolatrous for equating the Christian God with the object of worship in a pagan tradition.

The alternative was to use a Chinese transliteration of the Latin *Deus* in emulation of the case in the Japanese language, which is seen in a number of Chinese sources from the period as *Dousi* (陡斯).³ Unlike *Shangdi* (literally meaning “Sovereign-on-High”), *Dousi* was a neologism created from the phonetics of *Deus* that had no inherent meaning in the Chinese language and could therefore be given a meaning by the Jesuit missionaries that was completely congruous to the Christian understanding of God. The great danger of employing this foreign name,

¹ Han Siyi. “Deus and Confucian God: The Theological and Philosophical Reason for ‘Deus’ Translated as ‘Confucian God,’” *Journal for Judaic and Inter-religious studies of Shandong University*, 14 (2016).

² Yang Peng. 「上帝在中國」源流考：中國典籍中的「上帝」信仰. (Taiyuan: Shuhai Publishers, 2014), 8.

³ Han. “Deus and Confucian God.”

however, was that it would become an obstacle to Christianity's indigenisation in China as the Chinese would always perceive Christianity as something foreign, thus counterproductive to the mission's aim to convert the Chinese nation.

Ricci wholly accepted the term *shangdi* as translation for God based on the premise that its usage in key passages of the Chinese classical canon had a theistic significance and seemed to be roughly coterminous with what the Christian God denoted. He cited the following examples in his work *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*:⁴

“夏氏有罪，予畏上帝，不敢不正。” (The Xia have committed injustices. For fear of Shangdi, we dare not but rectify them) (*Book of Shang*, 商書).

“惟此文王，小心翼翼，昭事上帝，聿懷多福。” (King Wen acted with prudence and glorified Shangdi, inviting many blessings. (*Classic of Poetry*, 詩經)

Ricci thus concluded that *Shangdi* as it appears in the Chinese Classics differed from the conception of the ultimate in the religiously pluralistic China of his time. *Shangdi* was not the impersonal cosmic order of *taichi* as understood by the contemporary Taoists, or the voidness of *Sūnyatā* as posited by Buddhists. It was rather the personal entity whom people in ancient China worshipped, praised, gave thanks to, and served, thereby conforming to the Christian understanding of God.⁵ Ricci also discovered that many Christian theological themes could be mapped onto correlating concepts in this ancient Chinese cult of *Shangdi*, one instance being the claim in the *Book of Documents* (尚書), a text largely contemporaneous to the two above, that “wise kings of the Shang Dynasty are all in heaven.”⁶ An examination of the native Chinese religions during Ricci's time would reveal that the belief that the dead ascended to heaven is completely absent, whereas the notion was wholly coherent with Christian doctrine. It was such findings that led Ricci to his declaration that “Our God is the Chinese *Shangdi*”.⁷

A theological link was thus established with this ancient form of Confucianism, and Ricci believed that the conversion of China to Christianity would be a mere restoration of this supposed monotheism of Chinese Antiquity,⁸ exclaiming that “the knowledge for serving *Shangdi* has been lost for a long time.”⁹ This statement was subversive because its implication was that the ancient Chinese received revelations from the Christian God like the Israelites, the only difference being that this revelation had been lost in China in subsequent centuries. This view was later supported by Blaise Pascal, who posited in his *Pensées* regarding God's revelation to the Chinese that “I believe only in the histories, whose witnesses got themselves killed. China obscures, but there is clearness to be found. Seek it.”¹⁰ In other words, Pascal believed that Christian revelation perished in ancient China because its witnesses had all been

⁴ Weizheng Zhu, *Matteo Ricci: Writing and Translations* (Hong Kong, City University Publications, 2001), 70.

⁵ Yin Yanan. “詮釋學視域下God漢譯名之爭。” *探索與爭鳴理論月刊*, July 2011.

⁶ Zhu, *Matteo Ricci*, 87.

⁷ Zhu, *Matteo Ricci*, 92.

⁸ Nicolas Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China* (Brill, 2001) 642.

⁹ Zhu, *Matteo Ricci*, 68.

¹⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (The Modern Library, 1941), 193-4.

murdered, but traces of it could be recovered if sought after attentively. This was the essence of Ricci's quest in China's religious environment that was characterised by a multiplicity of deities: To reinstate the worship of the true God whom he believed was already present in the country's own classical literature.

The term question was reignited with the arrival in the nineteenth century of Protestant missionaries, who rejected the translation *Shangdi* as idolatrous. They espoused that since the purpose of missions was to "liberate the Chinese from their polytheistic illusion", translating the divine name of the Bible with *Shangdi*, a term the missionaries interpreted as only one of many deities in the Chinese celestial bureaucracy, would be a hindrance to this end.¹¹ The Anglican missionary William Boone suggested that the Christian God is more adequately rendered in Chinese as *shen* (神) based on the understanding that this term referred to supernatural beings in general rather than one particular deity.¹² It must be noted that the evangelisation that took place in China during this time was a direct consequence of Western expansion, where missionary activities were tied to the political prowess of the metropole. Therefore, it is suspected that the missionaries' deliberations were coloured as much by theological understanding as by a Eurocentric arrogance in the mentality of the civilising mission.

A digression into the Western nomenclature of God is helpful. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas argued that man can attribute names to the divine being, but such names could never fully express the being's complete nature because it is a product of man's flawed, creaturely capacity for reason.¹³ Justin Martyr (100-165) is credited to have first used the term *Deus* to express the Christian God, but the term itself is a cognate with and derives from the Greek *Zeus*, the leader of the Olympian Gods in Greek mythology. Thus, Justin Martyr found a conceptual convergence between the Greek notion of the ultimate being and the supreme God of the Israelites who stated "I am that I am" (Exod 3:14), in a fashion not dissimilar to Ricci's appropriation of *Shangdi* from the Chinese. Yet *Deus* has been understood by the Latin Church throughout the early and mediaeval periods to denote exclusively the God of the Bible, with most believers unaware of the term's pagan origins, much like the way generations of Chinese believers between the times of Ricci and the Protestant missionaries had come to understand *Shangdi* as Christianity's God rather than the deity in the supposed ancient monotheism.

Ultimately, the spread of Christianity into China initiated a cultural dialogue of a deeply philosophical and theological nature, the term question being one of its prime manifestations. The controversy represented an early exploration of the fundamental relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture, a matter still highly personal to Chinese believers and relevant to present-day Christianity's Sinicisation. Today, two parallel versions of the Chinese Bible exist that use the terms *Shangdi* and *Shen* respectively, and Google searches of "*Shangdi*

¹¹ Han. "Deus and Confucian God."

¹² Han. "Deus and Confucian God."

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Cosmos Classics, 2007), 272.

so loved the world...” and “*Shen* so loved the world...” (John 3:16) yield roughly equally as many results, both of which are understood by millions of Chinese-speaking Christians in the same way as Anglophone Christians understand “God”. It is hoped that the reader sees that the dissemination of the Christian faith has always been an interaction between multiple different, at times conflicting, cultural contexts, and that the purist insistence on one particular name for God is almost always misguided because translations are informed by these human contexts.

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