

## CONFESSION RITUALS AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF FORGIVENESS IN ASIAN RELIGIONS AND CHRISTIANITY

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**Abstract.** In this paper I will take into account the historical, religious and philosophical aspects of the examination of conscience, penance and satisfaction, as well as ritual confession and cure, in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. I will also take into account the difficulties that baptized Chinese Christians met in sacramental Catholic confession. Human history proves that in every culture and religion, man has always had a need to be cleansed from evil and experience mutual forgiveness. What ritual models were used by Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism? To what degree did these models prove to be true? What are the connections between a real experience of evil, ritual confession, forgiveness and cure in Chinese religions and philosophies?

When reading the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (Nr 1, Spring 2009), I was touched by the article “The double-movement model of forgiveness in Buddhist and Christian rituals” (pp. 27-39) written by Paul Reasoner and Charles Taliaferro. In my view the authors presented a very interesting Buddhist and Christian model of forgiveness, though, according to them, it was “only an initial exploration into forgiveness rituals” (p. 38).

In this essay I would like to focus on confession rituals and the philosophy of forgiveness with penitence in Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and to present the problem of confession in the Chinese mission, as written about by Jesuit missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

From the earliest years Christians have been familiar with methods of examination of conscience, especially before the sacrament of reconciliation, but also in everyday evening prayer. What did the examination of

conscience and other forms of penitence and satisfaction look like in Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism?

### THE EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE IN CONFUCIANISM

The examination of conscience and reparation for sin/wrong-doing were an important element of classical Confucianism. It was a chance for sinners to recognize their actions, mend their ways and make a new start.

In the *Confucian Analects*, one of Confucius' students – Tsengshen<sup>1</sup> (505-437 BC) says: „Every day I examine myself on the basis of three points: my issues with others, whether I was faithful; my relations with friends, whether I was honest; and thirdly, whether I followed (in practice) my teacher's teachings.”<sup>2</sup>

Confucius, who believed that one can achieve perfection by constant self-improvement<sup>3</sup> (self-training), shared the knowledge of how to become one's own master with his students.

### REPENTANCE AND THE EARLIEST CONFESSION RITES IN ANCIENT CHINA

It is worth mentioning that the earliest records of confession practices<sup>4</sup> date from the period of Emperor Ling 靈 of the Han dynasty 漢 reign (206 BC - 220 AD)

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<sup>1</sup> Later Chinese generations will call him Tseng tse; 子 (tse) – a title granted as a mark of respect and distinction among people. It was usually granted to masters honored for culture and science in China.

<sup>2</sup> Wu H. C., Li C. K., Teh M. Y., 中國寓言, *Chinese Moral Tales*, Chinese Ed., 台北市, 正中書局印行, 民66年 4.

<sup>3</sup> Confucius believed that one can achieve perfection. He examined his thoughts, words and actions, and considered how he behaved towards his friends and his students. You can say that Confucius made an examination of conscience every day according to a method he got to know himself, and used on himself and his students. On Confucius' part it was an effort that enabled him to get to know and overcome himself.

It resembles St. Ignatius Loyola and the Ignatian Examen of Conscience. See I. Loyola, *Ejercicios Espirituales*, SAL TERRAE 1990, 59). The examination of conscience is a prayer of life. It allows a person to review their own actions and the gifts of the day that has passed. What is the examination of conscience for Ignatius Loyola? It is not limited to a review of one's own sins or negligence only, but it is a revision of a day. For St. Ignatius a prayer is a tool that is supposed to satisfy the soul. See I. Loyola, *Konstytucje Towarzystwa Jezusowego*, Kraków: WAM 2001, 288.

<sup>4</sup> Wu Pei-Yi, 吳百益, „Self-Examination and Confession of Sin in Traditional China”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. I (1979), 6.

In *Hou-Han shu*'s book there is the following fragment:

Chang Chüeh 張角 of Chu-lu styled himself the great sage and Good Teacher. He followed the way of Huang-ti and Lao-tzu, collecting around himself a number of disciples. They were taught by him to practise healing. The patients were asked to kneel, make obeisance, and confess their offences. The procedure, together with Chang' spells, holy water, and incantations cured a great number of the sick.<sup>5</sup>

Another example: Pei Sung–chih, from the commentary to Chan Lu's biography in *Sankuo chih*:

Chang Hsiu's 張修 method was similar to Chang Chüeh's, except that he had silent chambers provided for the sick in which they would reflect on their transgressions. . . He appointed „demon-deputies” who appealed to the gods through prayers on behalf of the sick. For each patient the demon-deputy would write down his name and his confession. Three copies of the document were made: one was to be placed on a mountain peak for presentation to Heaven, one was to be buried underground, and one sunk into water. These were called the dispatches to the Three Offices.<sup>6</sup>

Confessing one's sins in a written form became a standard practice in China. Healing by faith, or, more widely, by symbolic therapy, has played and still plays an important role in Chinese medicine to this day. An interesting phenomenon is the fact that after the 6<sup>th</sup> century the liturgy of sin confession and cure disappeared.<sup>7</sup>

One of the Buddhist stories about sin says that when Chaos was splitting, a man with a sin root and a woman with a sin cave were created. If a sin is united with a sin, it accumulates and cannot be removed. It accumulates as if something hard accumulated and becomes a mountain, or as if something fluid accumulated and then becomes a sea. What could the end of that be if sins are constantly accumulating? As Tai Jia says, „From sins that are sent from heaven one can still escape, but if we commit them, we cannot live anymore. Sinners should not gather together, as then they cannot sin. According to Buddha, if you want to mend the world, you have to turn away from it. This is how Buddhist monks and nuns came into existence.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Rummel S. M., „Der Mönche und Nonnen Sündenmeer, Der budsdhistische Klerus in der chinesischen Roman – und Erzählliteratur des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts”, Bochum 1992, 150.

Confession had a long history in Indian Buddhism. The practice of ritual confession and repentance – *chanhui* 懺悔 was an essential element of Buddhist monasticism<sup>9</sup>. Confession in Sanskrit – *uposatha* 懺悔 was established in early monastic Buddhist rules. However, there is no way to give an exact historic date when *uposatha* 懺悔 was introduced into the lives of monks in China.<sup>10</sup> According to the rule, the monks gave themselves over to *uposatha* 懺悔 twice a month, preceding it with fasting and sacrifice. Monastic rules were read then, and during the examination part a monk who committed a sin could admit his sins.<sup>11</sup> Offences against Buddha, his teachings and the monastic community were sins. Then there were the sins of thoughts, words and actions, bad attitudes of various kinds: lust, arrogance, anger, hypocrisy, deception, hostility, jealousy, quarrelling.<sup>12</sup> It seems that *uposatha* 懺悔 could not have been known in China before the arrival of the first Buddhist monks from India. The first historical proof of its presence in China was found in a text by a monk called Tao-an 道安 (321-85 AD), the text showing that *uposatha* 懺悔 rites were followed in a Chinese monastic organization.<sup>13</sup>

One of the formulas that were used stated:

Even when I was a child I was given to gluttony. My voraciousness knew no compassion, nor did my appetite understand retribution. In my mind I consigned all scaly, furry, and feathery creatures to the kitchen, excluding them from my sympathy on account of their not being human. From morning to night and from season I devoured them, never satisfied with a vegetable meal.<sup>14</sup>

It should be added that confession took place in a group of five monks with a president whose task was to accept the sins confessed.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> D. Stevenson, “Confession and Contrition in Chinese Buddhism from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries”, *Journal of Chinese Religions*, No. 24, (Kansas: University of Kansas, 1996), 203.

<sup>10</sup> Wu Pei-Yi, 吳百益, “The Confucian’s Progress, Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China”, (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1989), 218.

<sup>11</sup> The whole liturgy of ritual confession was accompanied by hymns of praise, „Litanies to all Buddhas”, and at the end a state of joy and hope. See E. Zürcher, *Buddhist Chanhui and Christian Confession in 17th Century China*, Ritual Workshop, Sinologie, (Leuven : Katholieke Universiteit 2004, June 17-19), 7-9.

<sup>12</sup> E. Zürcher, “Buddhist Chanhui and Christian Confession in 17th Century China”, Ritual Workshop, Sinologie, (Leuven : Katholieke Universiteit 2004, June 17-19), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Wu PeiYi, 吳百益, „Self-Examination and Confession of Sin in Traditional China”, 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Y. L. Kuo, “Confession et Contrition dans le Bouddisme Chinois du Ve au Xe Siècle”, No. 170, Monographies Paris: École F. D’Extreme-Orient, 1994, 33.

Buddhist monks, starting from novices, should follow 10 Buddhist commandments, worship Buddha, the Buddhist law and monastic rules, meditate and say Buddhist psalms.<sup>16</sup> After every commandment there is a question: Have you followed it? One of Buddhist nuns gives the following testimony: “I left the secular world and went into Buddha’s world. My body is clean, but my heart is not. If storms and rains shall rage, I think they will knock on my door next.”<sup>17</sup>

Buddhism did not forbid entering into a marriage union. Buddhist marriage played as important role a role in Buddhism, as marriage does in Christianity. Prayers for preserving virginity were addressed to Buddhist monks and nuns, and not to secular people practicing Buddhism.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from religious Buddhism, all secular believers had to/were obliged to follow the following commandments included in the *uposatha*:

- Avoid eating at improper times (e.g. from 12:00).
- Abstain from dancing, singing and music.
- Avoid cosmetics and fragrances.
- Avoid high or big beds.
- Do not use gold or silver.<sup>19</sup>

As Kuo Li-ying writes, it is proven that ritual confession had a great influence on the development of Buddhist monastic life in China<sup>20</sup>, and at the same time it had an influence on Confucian Chinese society and the shaping of its hierarchy of values.<sup>21</sup>

The principal difference between Buddhist and Catholic confession is that confession in Buddhism is not sacramental, it is rather of a general

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<sup>16</sup> L. Wieger, “Bouddisme Chinois, Vinaya, Monachisme et Discipline, Hinayana”, Paris: Véhicule Inférieur, Cathasia, 1951, 153.

<sup>17</sup> Rummel S. M., „Der Mönche und Nonnen Sündenmeer, Der budshistische Klerus in der chinesischen Roman – und Erzählliteratur des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts”, 30.

<sup>18</sup> W. Li, „Die Christliche China-Mission im 17. Jahrhundert, Verständnis, Unverständnis, Missverständnis, eine Geistesgeschichtliche Studie zum Christtum, Buddhismus, und Konfuzianismus“, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2000, 166.

<sup>19</sup> Gananath Obeyesieke, “Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism”, in *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, ed. Edmund Leach, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1968), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Y. L. Kuo, “Confession et Contrition dans le Bouddisme Chinois du Ve au Xe Siècle”, 170.

<sup>21</sup> 林語堂, 吾國與吾民, 台北市, 民國78年中月出版, 39. This is one of the special texts I analyzed, apart from the Chinese classics, about the culture, history and psychology of the Chinese person and his character *dexing* 德性, taking into consideration the differences and concepts of the Chinese and Western world.

nature. It is a common expiation, not an individual one. The only similarity may be between the penitential rite during a mass (*Confiteor*) and a Buddhist *chanhui* 懺悔. The Christian criticism that the ritual of Buddhist confession seemed to be a routine, flat ritual without spiritual depth and with superficial motivations, is not fully justified. Entering a little deeper into the motivation behind Buddhist confession, we meet seven points that are worth at least our notice:

- First, **shame**: I must realize that long ago, at the start of his spiritual career as a Bodhisattva, the Buddha was an ordinary fellow (fangfu), just like me. Look what he has accomplished, and how little I have achieved – I still am a (fangfu). That is a reason for deep shame and remorse.
- Second, **fear**. I must tremble at the thought of the consequences of my sins, the mass of suffering that awaits me in future lives.
- Third, **disgust**. I must look upon this body of mine as a source of pain and pollution; in all respects it is impure and disgusting. All bodily existence is loathsome, and I must strive to be liberated from it.
- Fourth, **intent**. Once delivered from the burden of sin I may hope to give rise to the Intention aimed at Enlightenment (puti xin), striving for the pure transcendent Buddha-body, while advancing along the path of the Bodhisattva.
- Fifth, **equanimity**. I may hope to develop the universal compassion that is free from any thought of “I” and “the other”. As long as I make any distinction between enemies and loved ones my mind still is fettered by discriminating thought, which is a source of attachment, sin and suffering.
- Sixth, **gratitude**. I must consider how during innumerable lives as a Bodhisattva the future Buddha has toiled and suffered, sacrificing his body, parting with his wife and children, and abandoning all he had, and how he did that for my sake. Such a grace is hard to requite. I must do my utmost to dedicate myself to the Three Jewels and to save all beings.
- Seventh, **emptiness**. Finally I may expect to realize the illusory nature of sin, its arising and its elimination, for these still belong to the World of causation. On the highest level of truth they have no substantiality.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> E. Zürcher, “Buddhist Chanhui and Christian Confession in 17th Century China”, 13-14.

Indeed, the text is interesting and worthy of consideration. We will not accomplish everything on our own. We constantly need the Saviour's grace, and every Buddhist's wish is to achieve the level of Bodhisattva and to be released from all obstacles.

## RITUAL CONFESSION IN TAOISM

Cleansing rites have a long history. In religious Taoism there was a special liturgy *San-yüan* 三元, for Heaven, Earth and Water. In Taoism, confession was a result of experiencing the sins committed, and feeling fear. The practice of 'sin confession', *shouguo* 首過, and being accused of sins, *siguo* 思國 are known in early Taoist religious life. From the very beginning, in Taoist sects, in *Tai ping dao* 太平道 and in *Tian shi dao* 天師道, at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the main component was the curing of people from diseases and the confession of sins. That is why "the ill were asked to kneel down and confess their sins."<sup>23</sup> This practice lasted throughout the period of six dynasties. On this occasion "all priests should confess their sins and regret them."<sup>24</sup> Chinese experts in the field of confession rites in Taoism think that these confession rites were borrowed from the Buddhist *uposatha* 懺悔, because up to the 4<sup>th</sup> century *uposatha* 懺悔 was complied with in all Chinese monastic organizations.<sup>25</sup> The Taoist (ritual) of confession was called *zhai*, *cleansing*, or *baochan* – *treasure-penance*, and liturgically, it was similar to collective Buddhist confession.<sup>26</sup> This is confirmed by historical documents written down in Taoist texts of the *Tai ping jing* 太平經 (*Book of Great Peace*), which contains written formulae for ritual confession, repentance and the resolution to change oneself. All the monks of a Taoist monastery had to follow the following commandments:

- You should not kill or harm other living creatures.
- You should not eat meat or blood of another living creature.
- You should not drink wine.
- You should not flatter nor speak falsely and confirm untruth.

<sup>23</sup> C. T. Lai, "Hope in the Early Taoist Experience of Sins and Repentance", in *Interpretations of Hope in Chinese Religions and Christianity*, ed. D. L. Overmyer and C. T. Lai, Hong Kong : Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 2002, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Wu P. Y., 吳百益, *Self-Examination and Confession of Sin in Traditional China*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> C. T. Lai, "Hope in the Early Taoist Experience of Sins and Repentance", 62.

<sup>26</sup> E. Zürcher, 17.

- You should not speak evil, swear or curse.
- You should not turn a lie into a truth and certify untruth.
- You should not look at women, so that you can be saved from impure thoughts.
- You should not do harm nor take the last penny away from others.
- You should not desire your neighbor's property in an unjustified way.<sup>27</sup>

Taoism developed the religious character of curing illnesses with a practice of ritual confession. A therapeutic method, securing one from blame and fear, was created, a kind of internalization or rationalization of the moral responsibility of conscience. Taoism also placed an emphasis on an enriched magic liturgy of burying of the dead and releasing them from their sins.<sup>28</sup> Taoists hoped that by complying with ritual confession they would also protect themselves against their dead ancestors' viciousness and achieve a long life – 使得長生, or even immortality 在不死之籍, of which they had always been assured.

We should appreciate the originality and novelty of the Taoist method, which was later taken over by Buddhists, who, during the Ming 明 (1368 - 1644) dynasty, introduced a daily register of good and bad deeds, the so-called, *gongguo Ge* 功過個<sup>29</sup>

Confucians, in comparison with Buddhists and Taoists, have never had a liturgy of confession.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps revealing one's faults in public did not correspond with the model of perfection in classical Confucianism. They have always wanted to be models of perfection for the masses, keeping their rituals and rules. In this, they resemble the Pharisees, stigmatized by Jesus in the Gospel.

One of the special students of the so-called School of Thinking, Wang Chi, introduces for the first time a concept of internal knowledge, *liang-chih* 良知 as a distinction between good and evil. *Liang-chih* 良知, as Wu P. Y 吳百益 writes, refers more to a scale or compass and less to an act, a judgment, or a criticism.<sup>31</sup> For many centuries a word synonymous with „conscience“ was looked for in the Chinese language. Eventually a Men-

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<sup>27</sup> G. Malmquist, *Die Religionen Chinas*, HRD, Jahrbuch der Karl-May-Gesellschaft 1989, 38.

<sup>28</sup> C. T. Lai, "Hope in the Early Taoist Experience of Sins and Repentance", 71.

<sup>29</sup> E. Zürcher, "Buddhist Chanhui and Chistian Confession in 17th Century China", 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 14.



cian term was found, (孟子), called *liangxin* 良心<sup>32</sup>, (conscience) commonly used in the Catholic church.

### THE CHINESE AND THE CATHOLIC PERSONAL CONFESSION

For a Chinese, after receiving baptism in the Catholic church, confession 告解之禮 was an often insurmountable psychological barrier. It was associated with shame and humiliation. As Adam Schall von Bell SJ 湯若望<sup>33</sup> (1551-1666) writes, Zhang Geng mentions the feelings of many believing Chinese in the following ways: „It is disgraceful and humiliating to confess your sins!”, and „It is disgraceful that confession is so direct”<sup>34</sup>.

From the very beginning missionaries placed a lot of emphasis on explaining the sense of the sacrament of reconciliation, and its use in the rhythm of life of the Chinese Christian community.<sup>35</sup> However, frequent confession was much more difficult than in Europe, as there were not enough priests, and the area of service of Catholic missions was large. There was probably also an obstacle of a psychological nature to a direct meeting with a priest and confession of sins. For many Chinese people it was connected with a loss of face because another person got to know their sins. The spiritual factor did not always prevail as the psychological barriers were often stronger.

To raise the spiritual level of the elite, Jesuits used Ignatian spirituality, taking into consideration especially the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, which included a detailed and daily self-examination<sup>36</sup>, and also a general self-examination. Thanks to the *Spiritual Exercises* a moral and

<sup>32</sup> 英漢信理神學字典, 輔仁大學著作會, 光啓出版社台灣, *English-Chinese Vocabulary of Dogmatic Theology*, by the Translation Committee of Theological Writings, (Taipei: Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei 1985), 57.

<sup>33</sup> A German Jesuit missionary in China, Adam Schall, mainly known under his Chinese name *Tang ruo wang* 湯若望.

<sup>34</sup> See a well-documented case mentioned by Adam Schall SJ (1592-1666), *Daily Record of Miscellanea Made at the Chonyi Church*, in E. Menegon, „Deliver us from Evil” 救我放兇惡: „Confession and Salvation in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Chinese Catholicism”, Ritual Workshop, Sinologie, (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit 2004, June 17-19) Xi’an, 1638, Vol. II, 833-837.

<sup>35</sup> E. Menegon, „Deliver us from Evil” 救我放兇惡: „Confession and Salvation in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Chinese Catholicism”, Ritual Workshop, Sinologie, (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit 2004, June 17-19), p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Self-examination includes three times at which one examines oneself twice.

spiritual growth was observed. In Chinese letters St. Ignatius' sons presented a confessor as a good doctor curing a penitent from his sins.<sup>37</sup> The traditional image of confessors as judges, as identified in the decrees of the Council of Trent, was less important for Jesuit writers.<sup>38</sup>

According to the observations of Jesuit missionaries, the Chinese were less motivated to participate in the sacrament of reconciliation. Most of them were rather inclined to spiritual leadership, *jiao* 教, because the shame of confession still remained an obstacle difficult to overcome. People made their confessions once or twice a year, and most Chinese Catholics left confession for their hour of death.<sup>39</sup> However, there were exceptions too. Josph Zhu Yupu, related to the Ming dynasty, in the Kaifeng region, in 1630, when asked why absolution is needed, said:

One of the reasons why God gave the priest the power to confess is that it protects the missionary (保護傳教的神父). He thus will be respected and loved by people, they will approach him, listen to his religious instruction, and follow his teaching . . . He will be respected and loved because he enjoys such great powers, and because all those who have sinned must ask him to confess, otherwise God does not give absolution. There is no form of respect higher than this in the world. The sovereign in the court and the officials have power and influence over people, but absolutely cannot rival the power of the priest. How could he not be respected and loved by the people? . . . People will approach and follow him because, when they have sins, a priest must give them absolution, otherwise one cannot hope to avoid the pains of hell and enjoy heaven. These extremely important matters of the faithful are entrusted by God to the priest, how could people not approach and follow him?<sup>40</sup>

It seems that Chinese Catholics who accepted the concept of sin also accepted the need for confession to a confessor, even though it was not easy for them. Missionaries encouraged confession and communion, trying to eliminate mechanical ritualism. They were also lenient in giving penance

<sup>37</sup> E. Menegon, "Deliver us from Evil", 41.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 41. As O'Malley writes, at the beginning of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius Loyola appointed Alfonso de Polanco to write a text about confession for all Jesuits that re-echoed among them. *Breve directorium ad confessari ac confitentis munus recte obeundum*, short directives for confessor and penitent. The text was published in Rome in 1554. Apart from this document another one appeared, *De modo audiendi confessiones*, edited by another general, Diego de Lainez, containing detailed instructions for Jesuit confessors. Whereas *Konstytucje Towarzystwa Jezusowego* no 261, 342 and 344 describes self-examination and confession itself.

<sup>39</sup> E. Menegon, "Deliver us from Evil" 49, 50.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 52. A text entitled *Shebgjiao yuanliu* 聖教源流. A fragment from Josph Zhu Yupu's conversation with Rui de Figueiredo, SJ (1594-1642), dated 1635.

by lessening it. This was supposed to influence a greater attendance of people confessing and taking communion, but unfortunately it did not influence moral growth.<sup>41</sup>

A question still remains whether it would have been better to adhere to the requirements demanded from penitents, according to rules set by the Church, irrespective of the culture in which the Gospel of salvation was preached. However, some people suggested abolishing the concept of sin which was not originally a Chinese concept, but was artificially incorporated and implanted into the organism of Chinese culture, first by Buddhism and then by Christianity. To what extent has Christianity been implanted into Chinese culture? To what extent have Chinese culture and philosophy left their trail in Christianity in China? As we have shown in our article, Confucians, Buddhists and Taoists, as well as Christians, have aimed at cleansing their hearts, even though they have used different means. Buddhism used the commandments directly, similarly to Christianity. It would be a mistake to point out which of these methods was better or worse. All of them bore their fruit depending on their historical-philosophical-religious tradition.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

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