

The Chinese Concept of *Tian* (Heaven): Part 2

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In Part 1 of this paper, we mentioned three differing ways of viewing *Tian*: as one god among many, as an indifferent creator, or as the approachable God of the Bible. The paper reviewed God's accessibility, and how He reveals Himself to mankind. In the following pages we will consider the controversy over *Tian* in depth.

On the one hand, both Communism and some Christians posit that *Tian* is a god/an idol. The author observes that some Christians take *Tian* as a grandpa god, but neglect the fact that there are no images of *Tian*. In this part, we will investigate how some communist scholars take *Tian* as a god who is either superior or inferior to other gods.

On the other hand, influenced by animism, some people view *Tian* as a distant Being from humankind, yet many Christian scholars believe that *Tian* is the God revealed by the Bible, approachable and accessible. Is *Tian* distant from humankind or is *Tian* the Eternal God, approachable and accessible? The author makes his case for a correct understanding of God point-by-point using evidence regarding God's lordship.

The Controversy Over *Tian*

Controversy is not always harmful, for through controversy we may come closer to truth. Thus, by exploring different views of the Chinese concept of *Tian*, this paper aims to know deeper about *Tian* as God, rather than as a god, or an indifferent God. Presented first is an overview of the three views of *Tian* to be followed by a detailed explanation of each one.

Tian: An Idol, an Indifferent God, or the Eternal God?

A number of Christians, including some Chinese Christian scholars, such as Chan and Yuan Zhiming 远志明¹, argue that *Tian* is a remembrance of Jehovah inherited from the ancient Chinese, who either had a sincere relationship with God or a valid memory of God. No matter which view one holds, *Tian* is the Eternal God that the Bible reveals. Chan even identifies the ancient Chinese civilization as “a God-fearing race that desired to worship God appropriately.”²

Then there are others who hold that *Tian* is nothing more than a god (an idol). After taking over mainland China in 1949, the communist party somehow succeeded in making people treat all religions as superstition, but it could not sweep away animism—the root of superstition. Gailyn Van Rheenen testifies to the adamancy of animism, saying, “As long as Satan maintains his grip on the world, animism as a belief system will not die but will simply change with changing times.”³ Accordingly, one might wonder whether the concept of *Tian* fits into the animistic belief system in China. If so, is *Tian* a god among other gods in the Chinese animistic belief system or an indifferent Creator God who does not care about the world?

No Image: Not as an Idol

Chinese religions are full of gods created by the hands of people. In Romans 1:21-25, Paul describes how the true God hates people’s turning from Him to gods created by their own hands:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged

¹Most of Yuan Zhiming’s thoughts are expressed in his videos, *Shen zhou* 神州 (China’s Confession). These videos are still illegal inside mainland China. To purchase them, visit: www.chinasoul.org/index.php?option=com_virtuemart&page=shop.browse_cg&category_id=5&Itemid=52&lang=zh-cn&redirected=1&Itemid=5. (accessed 14 November 2017).

²Kei Thong Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers: Discovering God in Ancient China* (Singapore, China: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 2007), 10.

³Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1991), 25.

the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen (NIV).

While considering *Tian* as a god, people disagree whether *Tian* is superior or inferior to other gods.

Not as a God Superior to Other Gods

A few scholars, as well as some Christians, claim that *Tian* is a god superior to other gods for several reasons. First, among the common people in China, *Tian* is often called *Laotianye* 老天爷. The literal translation is “old grandpa in heaven,” because one of the meanings of the suffix *ye* 爷 is grandpa. Therefore, some preachers declare, “Chinese Christians have become the children of God, no longer the grandchildren of *Tian*! Surely *Tian* is not our God, for God does not have grandchildren!”⁴ Hence, for them *Tian* is the god of the sky or heaven among numerous gods in the Chinese religious system. *Tian* was created to explain the natural existence of the sky or to describe the more abstract heaven. The only difference is that *Tian* as the god of the sky or heaven is superior to other gods.

However, these people have ignored two important things. One is the fact that ‘*ye*’ does not mean grandpa only; it can also mean master. Therefore, *ye* is often added as a suffix to certain gods, such as *foye* 佛爷 (the Buddha), *yanwangye* 阎王爷 (the Yama), *tudiye* 土地爷 (a local god of land), etc. It functions to demonstrate the power or lordship of these gods. In the same way, *ye* as a suffix can also modify *Tian* to emphasize the lordship of *Tian*. The other thing that they neglect is that *Tian* never appears as an image of an old grandpa with a long beard. Neither does *Tian* appear as an image of heaven nor the sky. Actually, neither heaven nor the sky can be expressed with any image. In other words, people have difficulty in choosing or making something to represent the sky/heaven/Heaven. To summarize, those who take *Tian* as an idol in such a way are mostly illiterate.

Second, some religious groups, such as the Taoists, struggle with the fact that *Tian* has no images. Therefore, they choose to combine it with names of other gods or persons. Lihui Yang and Deming An describe how the highest god, *Yudi* 玉帝 (the Jade Emperor) in Taoism, emerged:

⁴I myself have heard such a sermon during a Christmas gathering in a house church in Awati farm, Korla City, Xinjiang Province in 2014.

Tian Di (the Supreme Heaven or the God of Heaven) or Shang Di (the Supreme God or the Supreme Divinity) sometimes assumes the position as the highest leader of the random pantheon of the gods. During the Tang or Song dynasty, the disorderly pantheon became systemized and Yu Di, the Jade Emperor who came into being when Taoism and beliefs of the Supreme God were merged together, turned out to be the supreme ruler of the comparative ordered pantheon of gods.⁵

Based on Yang and An's historical research, one can easily notice the Taoists' intention of combining *Tian* or *Di* with the Jade Emperor, so that few people will truly have difficulty in differentiating *Tian* from the Jade Emperor, though each is taken as a supreme God/god superior to other gods.

Not as a God Inferior to Other Gods

The Marxist scholar Chao Fulin 晁福林⁶ argues that during the Shang Dynasty the concept of *Tian* was expressed by *Di*; and *Di* was a celestial god developed by the Shang people from their worship of natural heaven.⁷ Chao's theory is a combination of the first and second views but expressed in a scholarly way. The difference is that Chao argues that *Di*, as a half natural-half celestial god, was even inferior to ancestor spirits;⁸ whereas most scholars (both Christian and secular) view *Tian* or *Di* as God or as a god superior to other gods.

Chao builds his radical theory mainly on the analysis of unearthed bone inscriptions that date back to the Shang Dynasty. His main argument can be summarized as follows: Because most of the oracle inscriptions shown on tortoise shells or animal bones prove that many significant sacrifices were not addressed to natural gods or ancestors instead of *Di*. This indicates that *Di*, in the Shang people's religious world, must not be capable of bringing blessings/victories or of getting rid of disaster/misfortunes for people.⁹ (Note: Since dealing with oracle inscriptions is beyond the author's ability due to his lack of knowledge of archaeology and archaic Chinese, this paper endeavors to refute

⁵Lihui Yang and Deming An, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 63.

⁶If the Chinese characters of an author's name are given, it means the resources that quoted in this paper are written in Chinese. If they're not given, it means the resources are written in English.

⁷Fulin Chao, "Remarks on the Theocracy in the Yin Dynasty 论殷代神权," *China Social Science* 中国社会科学 1 (1999): 112. Note. Yin 殷 is another word for Shang.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., 107-12.

Chao's theory from aspects other than analyzing contents of those unearthed oracle inscriptions.)

First, the fact that many sacrifices recorded in the oracle inscriptions were not offered to *Di* does not nullify *Di*'s highest position in the spiritual realm during the Shang Dynasty. As Poo points out, "The oracle-bone inscriptions yield only part of the religious beliefs of the Shang people; we have no evidence concerning other religious activities, wherein different aspects of piety might be expressed. There is, moreover, no evidence as to whether, or how, people would react when the oracles failed."¹⁰ Moreover, *Di* did appear in some cases, Lian Shaoming 连劭名 providing the evidence. He writes, "In the Shang Dynasty, the Heaven's revelations were also offered with Baiji, as well as military actions for victory."¹¹ Furthermore, Chan testifies that the most important sacrifice ceremony is the Ceremony of Sacrifice to Heaven.¹²

Second, Chao is a follower of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx. Therefore, he quotes what Engels wrote to Marx in 1846 to support his belief—i.e., the impossibility for the concept of the Supreme God to appear in the Shang Dynasty.¹³ In fact, while writing to Marx, Engels was commenting on Feuerbach:

With the domination of the world by intelligence and will, supernaturalism makes its appearance, creation from nothing, and monotheism, which is further specifically elucidated in terms of the "unity of the human consciousness." Feuerbach deemed it superfluous to point out that without the *One King*, the One God could never have come into being, that the Oneness of the God controlling the multifarious natural phenomena and holding together the conflicting forces of Nature is only the image of the One, the Oriental Despot who apparently or in fact holds together conflicting individuals whose interests clash.¹⁴

¹⁰Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 29.

¹¹Shaoming Lian, "Baiji and Yuji in the Shang Dynasty 商代的拜祭与御祭," *Acta Archaeologica Sinica* 考古学报 1 (2011): 56. Note. Baiji was held to pray for blessings, while Yuji was for getting rid of misfortunes.

¹²Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 115.

¹³Chao, "Remarks on the Theocracy in the Yin Dynasty," 112.

¹⁴Friedrich Engels, "Engels to Marx in Brussels," in *Letters of Marx and Engels, 1846*; available from www.marxistsfr.org/archive/marx/works/1846/letters/46_10_18.htm; (accessed 28 September 2017).

Thus, applying Feuerbach's nonsense, Chao declares that the concept of *Di* as the One God was not created until a real despot appeared after the Shang Dynasty.¹⁵

Accordingly, Chao does not only place *Di* as inferior to other gods, but also makes *Di* become something fictional. In other words, in the Shang Dynasty, *Di* as a natural/celestial god was created by people to fool themselves; and after the Shang Dynasty, *Di (Tian)* as an illusory Supreme God was created by the first human despot through his intelligence and will to fool his people. Hence, the concept of the Supreme God in communism is no longer the One God or is not even a god, but rather a tool invented by the ruling classes to control people. This kind of theory has no place in Christian theology.

To summarize this section, *Tian* is neither a superior god, nor a tool, nor an inferior god. On the contrary, *Tian* is the Eternal God who has no images and desires to have intimate relationship with human beings.

No Indifference: *Tian* Not as a Distant God

Chan confirms, "In many cultures, even those that are polytheistic, this Creator God—referred to in some cultures as the High God—is regarded as utterly remote and transcendent, removed from the world and the affairs of men."¹⁶ This concept of the indifferent God is common in animism. For instance, Aylward Shorter describes how the Tanzanian Kimbu identify the Creator God as the ultimate begetter (the Life-Giver), while they worship ancestors and water-spirits.¹⁷

Because the communist government did not sweep animism away from China, one may wonder whether the Chinese concept of *Tian* falls into at least one of the ways in which animists view God. Van Rheenen presents three such ways:

Animists view God in different ways. He is understood to be (1) a distant, unapproachable Creator; (2) the Supreme Being who reflects his nature in lower spiritual beings; (3) the impersonal power that permeates all of nature. In each viewpoint the biblical view of God, the Creator who desires a personal, intimate relationship with his creation, is lost.¹⁸

¹⁵Chao, "Remarks on the Theocracy in the Yin Dynasty," 112.

¹⁶Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 34.

¹⁷Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (London, UK: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 50, 175.

¹⁸Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts*, 242.

The Chinese do not view *Tian* in any of these three ways. First, *Tian* is not distant and unapproachable. Yao and Zhao affirm that for the Shang people, *Di* determined human affairs in at least four ways: “He sent the rain down to the earth; he might hold the rain in check and send down famine instead; he brought victory to the army; and he brought fortune as well as misfortune to the world.”¹⁹ And the Zhou people “believed that *Tian* determined their fate, that the Mandate of Heaven (*Tian ming*) provided justification for their dynasty, and that *Tian* would bless the good and punish the evil.”²⁰ Belief in *Tian*’s morality still exists in people’s hearts today, although it is not as strong as faith.

Second, *Tian* does not reflect His nature in lower spiritual beings. In Romans 1:20, Paul declares that people may and should notice God’s eternal power and divine nature by perceiving His creation, not by observing lesser spiritual beings. Psalm 135:15-18 says, “The idols of the nations are but silver and gold, the work of man’s hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear, nor is there any breath at all in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them, yes, everyone who trusts in them” (NASB). Indeed, those who observe the blunt and stupid gods (idols) become likewise. Thus, God never allows His nature to be reflected in lower gods.

Third, *Tian* is not impersonal, but personal. In the Bible, it is obvious that God desires a personal and intimate relationship with the Israelites and desires the same relationship with Gentiles, too. Job, Rahab, Ruth, and many other non-Israelites all demonstrate this. *Tian*, as a moral God, desires to have a personal relationship with the Chinese. Thus, the highest dream of a righteous Chinese is to be one with *Tian*, as previously discussed.

Nevertheless, that God is moral does not mean He allows no suffering. Instead, God often disciplines people or nations by uprooting and tearing down in order to plant and build, so that they may take root downward and bear fruit upward (cf. Jer. 1:10 and Isa. 37:31). *Tian* does the same. For instance, Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius) writes,

Shun rose from the fields; Fu Yüeh was raised to office from amongst the builders; Chiao Ke from amidst fish and salt; Kuan Chung from the hands of the prison officer; Sun Shu-ao from the sea and Po-li His from the market. That is why Heaven, when it is about to place a great burden on a man, always first tests his resolution, exhausts his frame and makes him suffer

¹⁹Xinzhong Yao and Yanxia Zhao, *Chinese Religion: A Contextual Approach* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 54.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 55.

starvation and hardship, frustrates his efforts so as to shake him from his mental lassitude, toughen his nature and make good his deficiencies.²¹

The people mentioned by Mencius were kings or ministers who came to this world in humility but finally became noble through suffering. Similarly, in the Old Testament when God was about to use Joseph and David, He first gave them hardships to build them up—Joseph was sold as a slave; David was chased and nearly killed by Saul.

The New Testament confirms suffering for believers. Jesus tells His disciples that in this world they will have tribulations (cf. Jn. 16:33). In Acts 14:22, Paul and Barnabas strengthened the believers by affirming, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (NIV). To the Philippians, Paul writes, “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Phil. 1:29, NASB). Peter also confirms, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps” (1 Pet. 2:21, NASB).

To summarize, *Tian* is not indifferent, but rather is approachable and accessible. As Christians will enter the kingdom of God through suffering, so will many Chinese enter the kingdom of *Tian* through *Tian*’s trials. The Christian scholar Chan amply analyzes both the natural and moral attributes of *Tian*,²² and all indicate that *Tian* is the Christian God.

Lordship: *Tian* as the Eternal God

Secular scholars Yao and Zhao also summarize several attributes or characteristics of *Tian*, writing, “Belief in the supreme high authority above, who was infinite, all-encompassing, all-knowing, and universal, became the centre of religious life in early China.”²³ All these descriptions of *Tian*’s characteristics point to *Tian*’s lordship.

Indeed, of these characteristics the most significant is lordship, which echoes the Apostle Paul’s description of God’s invisible attributes. In Romans 1:18-20, Paul wrote to the church in Rome declaring that no residents in Rome could have any excuse for their ungodly behavior:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is

²¹Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. by D. C. Lau (London. UK: Penguin Books, 2003), 143.

²²Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 88-104.

²³Yao and Zhao, *Chinese Religion*, 55.

evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened (NASB).

Here Paul tells us that God's eternal power and divine nature, although invisible, are nonetheless perceptible and understandable through His creation. Elsewhere, Paul also declares that, even during times of ignorance, if people seek the Lord, they will find Him, for He is not far from humanity (cf. Acts 17:27, 30). God's eternal power and divine nature indicate His lordship because those who know Him but do not honor Him deserve His wrath. God overlooks the ignorant but does not ignore those who have noticed His lordship. In addition, Paul's teachings (inspired by God through the Holy Spirit) apply to all human groups, including the Chinese.

For instance, the modern Chinese young man (mentioned at the beginning of Part I of this paper) realized *Tian's* divine nature of holiness and eternal power for offering help, because they were deeply located in his conscience. Thus, for him, only *Tian* could handle his struggle with sin, which was incredibly painful. In Romans 7:15-24, Paul vividly describes how despairing the process of struggling with sin actually is—i.e., doing what one knows he ought not to do and not doing what one knows he ought to do! It's a struggle that leads to a cry of deep desperation: "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (v. 24, NASB). Fortunately, Paul provides the solution in verse 25—Jesus Christ!

But not knowing Jesus at that point, the young man could only pray to *Tian* for help. Although he asked *Tian*, who is of divine holiness, to kill him by sending lightening if he sinned again, he intended to seek *Tian's* help to not sin any more. In desperation, to whom could a human being pray? Certainly God, for He is the only One that people could pray to in times of desperation. Wilhelm confirms that *Tian* "was God and was prayed to as such."²⁴

Moreover, in the Song 宋 Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), while commenting on the Book of Changes, Confucian scholar Cheng Yi explains the concept of *Tian* thusly—in terms of abode, as *Tian*; and in

²⁴Hellmut Wilhelm, *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1997), 40.

terms of lordship, as *Di*.²⁵ In other words, the lordship of *Tian* is more expressed by the parallel concept of *Di*, for *Di* is more personal than *Tian*. Wilhelm states, “*T’ien*, too, was a personal god, but *Di* was even more personal; he was a god who would draw close to man and could be exceedingly awesome.”²⁶

Thus, we can see that “*Tian*” carries almost the same meaning as “*Di*”, with both bearing the lordship of God. However, while translating the Bible for the Chinese, none of the foreign missionaries chose the word *Tian* for God. Li Tang summarizes this as follows:

As for the word God, in modern Chinese, there are three words to render it, *Shen* (神) which is used to describe spiritual beings, *Shangdi* (上帝) which literally means “the heavenly emperor”, or *Tianzhu* (天主), the heavenly lord, which was adopted by the Catholics in China. *Shangdi* is a more contextualized word. The Nestorian documents used the word *Shen* for God.²⁷

The Nestorians were highly over-contextualized, while picturing Jesus like a Buddha and placing a lotus under the Cross. They chose *Shen* instead of *Tian* or *Di* for the word God because it is a generic word that refers to all deities. However, this can easily cause people to misunderstand; they may think that *Shen* (God) is just a *shen* among gods. The Protestant missionaries followed the first Catholics to use *Shangdi* for the word God. The word *Shangdi* is much better than *Shen*, for *Shangdi* shares more similarities with *Tian*.

Unfortunately, Christianity was considered as a tool that Western countries used to invade China. Accordingly, hatred has been developed toward both Christianity and the term *Shangdi*. Thus, some Chinese Christians try to avoid using the term *Shangdi* when sharing the gospel. Fortunately, the concept of *Tian* is identical with that of *Shangdi*, and no Chinese would hate the word *Tian*. Therefore, this paper has endeavored to illuminate the concept of *Tian* as Heaven in relation with God.

Conclusion

God is a missionary God who desires men and women to enter the kingdom of Heaven (cf. 1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Pet. 3:9). God is also a loving God who desires all human beings to have intimate relationship with Him.

²⁵Yi Cheng, *Cheng’s Commentary on the Book of Changes*. Vol. 1. My own translation.

²⁶Wilhelm, *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes*, 40.

²⁷Tang Li, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and Its Literature in Chinese* (Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften: Peter Lang, 2002), 129.

As Psalm 14:2 tells us, “The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God” (NASB). Thus, to achieve His desires, God intervenes in human history through general revelation.

As we have seen, God has intervened in the history of Athens through the inscription “To an Unknown God” and in Chinese history by the concept of *Tian* and *Tianming*. On the one hand, this paper has demonstrated how the concept of *Tian* is the most significant general revelation that God uses to communicate with the Chinese. Moreover, the lordship of *Tian* indicates that *Tian* is the eternal God revealed by the Bible. In addition, sometimes *Tian* purposely wills to develop certain people’s characters through suffering.

On one hand, this paper has proved that those who take *Tian* to be an idol or a god have neglected or denied general revelation due to illiteracy or blindness, while those who consider *Tian* to be an indifferent God have fallen into the animist view of the Creator God. This paper has also argued that *Tian* does not fit into any of the three ways in which animists view God. *Tian* is approachable, accessible, and personal, as opposed to being distant, indifferent, and impersonal.

In summary, throughout this paper, enough evidence indicates that *Tian* is *Yahweh*, the Jewish-Christian God who does care about human affairs and intervenes in human history. This paper has studied evidence in the areas of general revelation and lordship. Other evidence, such as *Tian*’s holiness and the ancient Chinese sacrificial system to *Tian*, deserves further exploration.

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