

## Article

# From Sacred Doctrine to Confucian Moral Practice: Giulio Aleni's Cross-Cultural Interpretation of "Goodness and Evil of Human Nature"

Xiangqian Che

School of Foreign Studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an 710072, China; carsonche@nwpu.edu.cn

**Abstract:** This paper explores the cross-cultural interpretation of "the goodness and evil of human nature" by Jesuit missionary Giulio Aleni in the late Ming Dynasty, and it examines the intersections and complementarity between Catholicism and Confucianism in moral ethics based on Aleni's integration. The study finds that Aleni, while basically adhering to the Catholic "original sin", connected the "spirituality" endowed to humans at the beginning of God's creation with the Confucian ontological concepts such as "ultimate good" (*zhishan* 至善); centering on "self-mastery" (*zizhuan* 自專), "sharpening" (*dili* 砥礪), and "overcoming nature" (*kexing* 克性), he actively guided the goodness–evil debate towards a Confucian practical morality, and sacred doctrines are served as an impetus of moral practices. The redemption, together with reward and punishment of God, further intensifies the ultimate concern and the way of transcendence. Aleni's bridging and synthesizing of the two traditions is highly significant: concerning both sanctity and practicality of ethics can to some extent overcome the risks brought by the instrumentalization of ethics or the illusory issues of existence. This has important implications for the self-development and integration of Christian and Confucian morality.

**Keywords:** Giulio Aleni; human nature; goodness and evil; Neo-Confucianism; moral practice



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## 1. Introduction

Human nature has consistently constituted a central theme within the discourse of all major religious traditions. It is interlinked with the comprehension of the cosmos and human existence, establishing a theoretical foundation through metaphysical inquiry, and it permeates into the tangible manifestations of daily life. This theme addresses both the existential realities and the aspirational ideals of human life, thereby shaping the diverse religious philosophies across various civilizations and belief systems.<sup>1</sup> In the late Ming Dynasty, missionaries such as Matteo Ricci 利瑪竇 (1552–1610) and Giulio Aleni 艾儒略 (1582–1649) came to China and initiated the "Western learning spreading to the East 西學東漸", which led to the first true encounter between Confucianism and Christianity, becoming a significant part of the history of Sino-Western cultural and ideological exchanges. Among this, the issue of morality and ethics has been one of the focal points, in which the debate on human nature plays a core role. In his dialogues with Confucian scholars, Chinese Christians, and catechists, Giulio Aleni, known as the "Confucius/Scholar from the West 西來孔子", adeptly merged Catholic doctrines with the entrenched Chinese moral philosophy, weaving concepts such as original sin, the Fall, and redemption into the proactive ethical praxis of Confucianism. This perspective transcends a mere negation of Confucian thoughts, and it significantly innovates the conceptualization of "nature" within the Confucian framework (Meynard and Pan 2020, p. 4). The approach of localization offers profound insights into the dialogue, synthesis, and communication between these two religious traditions, thereby rendering it a subject of considerable scholarly interest. The work of Aleni serves as a historical case study that exemplifies the complexities

and possibilities of cross-cultural communication in the realm of religion and moral philosophy. Accordingly, by examining Aleni's interpretations of human nature, this study endeavors to bridge gaps in understanding by elucidating the commonalities and divergences in ethical and philosophical thought across traditions, thereby shedding light on the cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue and development. It underscores the importance of intercultural understanding and the potential for reciprocal communication between different belief systems. This paper is also motivated by a desire to enrich the academic discourse on the intersection of religion and morality, seeking to contribute to the discussion on the universality of moral values and the particularities of their expression within distinct traditions.

A substantial body of scholarly work exists that delves into Giulio Aleni's interpretation of "nature" and "soul", presenting a multitude of divergent viewpoints and analytical frameworks. Recent studies have highlighted Aleni's approach to harmonizing Christian doctrines with Chinese Confucian culture, as evidenced in his works such as *A Brief Introduction to the Study of Human Nature* (*Xingxue cunshu* 性學彙述) (H. Zhu 2024; Lin 2020; Dong 2015) and *The True Source of the Myriad Things* (*Wanwu zhenyuan* 萬物真原) (Hosle and Dai 2024). These studies underscore Aleni's methodological ingenuity in adopting and adapting Confucian concepts to convey Christian principles centering on the issue of human nature, thereby facilitating a cross-cultural dialogue. Meynard and Pan's (2020) annotated work offers insights into his philosophical and theological perspectives on the soul's relationship with the heart and brain. Also, researchers such as Lü et al. (2019) scrutinize Aleni's cultural adaptation strategies, revealing his recognition of parallels between Catholicism and early Confucian thought, especially concerning the supreme deity and ethical frameworks. Song (2018) also presents an innovative "dialogic hybridization" framework, analyzing the *Kouduo richao* to understand the formation of a hybrid Christian–Confucian identity through Aleni's interactions with Chinese literati. While these works collectively advance understanding of Aleni's mission and the cultural exchanges of his time, there is a clear need for a focused examination of his perspective on "Goodness and Evil of Human Nature 人性善惡論": to date, scholarly investigations specifically dedicated to the discourse on this issue (distinct from the subject of "nature" as an umbrella term, see Note 1) remain relatively sparse in the academic domain. Meanwhile, in addition to the aforementioned two works, Giulio Aleni's other writings engage in a profoundly insightful discussion and integration of human nature, which merits scholarly investigation as well. In this study, the discussion predominantly draws upon two additional books (co-)authored by Aleni, *Diary of Oral Admonitions* (*Kouduo richao* 口鐸日抄) and *Recording of the Discussion on Learning in Fuzhou* (*Sanshan lunxueji* 三山論學記), serving as the foundational texts for analysis.

Based on the tracing of the general notions of goodness and evil of human nature<sup>2</sup> from both a Christian and Confucian traditions, this paper studies the work and interpretation of Giulio Aleni, particularly how he reconciled or bridged the gap between Christian and Confucian views on human nature. By specifically looking at how Christian theology might integrate with Confucian ethics, we also assess the significance of Aleni's interpretation for understanding inter-faith dialogue, cultural exchange, and the evolution of religious thought.

## 2. Traditions of the Western and Chinese Views on Goodness and Evil of Human Nature

The idea of human nature's inclination towards good or evil stands as a fundamental tenet of moral philosophy. Generally, the speculation in the West attributed the origin of evil to human error (Santangelo 1990, p. 231). The discourse on this matter represents a contentious subject in the intellectual exchange between Christianity and Confucianism, highlighting significant disparities in their comparative static analyses. Catholicism's most pivotal doctrine concerning human nature is that of "original sin 原罪", which aligns with the perspective that human nature is inherently tainted by evil. It posits that human nature is inherently sinful from its origin, with "sin" being a cardinal theme in Christian theology. The term "original sin" itself, though not explicitly found in the *Bible*, is derived from Old

Testament narratives. Apostle Paul underscores in the New Testament the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, teaching that salvation from sin is attainable solely through faith in God. The scriptural texts, while devoid of the term “original sin”, articulate the universal condition of sinfulness at birth: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5), and acknowledge a universal shortfall in the presence of God’s glory: “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Furthermore, the *Bible* suggests an innate propensity for sin that is embedded in human nature post-birth, with the inherent state of all being unrighteous from the moment of inception: “the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Genesis 8:21). Jonathan Edwards elucidates this as “the word translated youth, signifies the whole of the former part of the age of man, which commences from the beginning of life” (Edwards 1995, p. 143). In essence, this implies that the sinful nature is an attribute of humankind after the Fall: the genesis of sin is often traced back to the well-known rebellion of Adam and Eve against the divine command, as they stole the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, leading to their expulsion and the corruption of human. This act ruptured the covenant with God, resulting in the loss of original sanctity and justice, thereby shattering the initial harmony of human existence, the unity with creation, the governance of the soul over the body, and the relational equilibrium between man and woman. To elucidate the concept of “human nature”, a philosophical construct of ultimate significance throughout history, early theologians and philosophers have ascribed to it the term “original sin”.

Original sin serves as a profound illustration of the inherent susceptibility of human beings to worldly temptations from the moment of birth, which is considered the root cause of humanity’s moral downfall. The ramifications of sin are manifold, as it diminishes the innate strength of human nature, rendering it beset by ignorance, suffering, and mortality, and predisposed toward sinful behavior. It denotes the failure of human to adhere to the divine standards established by God, with a particular emphasis on the repercussions stemming from the exercise of free will. It is undeniable that the concept of “original sin” inherently encompasses a profound critique of the propensity for evil within human nature, positing that humans enter the world in a state of sinfulness and must endure the repercussions of the severed relationship between humanity and the divine. However, it would be erroneous to deduce that original sin signifies an absolute loss of human nature’s essence. As St. Thomas Aquinas puts it:

In the state of corrupt nature, he falls short of what nature makes possible, so that he cannot by his own power fulfil the whole good that pertains to his nature. Human nature is not so entirely corrupted by sin, however, as to be deprived of natural good altogether. Consequently, even in the state of corrupt nature a man can do some particular good by the power of his own nature but he cannot achieve the whole good natural to him, as if he lacked nothing. (Aquinas 1954, p. 119)

Yet for Saint Augustine, he developed the “sin” into the theory of evil of human nature, arguing that man has lost the capacity for goodness after original sin, and that man’s autonomy is completely reduced to the root of evil. Augustine argued that the will, initially created in goodness and in concord with the divine will, has been so severely compromised by the taint of original sin that it renders humans incapable of attaining righteousness through their own efforts alone. However, the predicament in advancing the doctrine of original sin to a theory of innate evil lies in the dilemma that, if the will has lost its capacity to tend toward and choose good, how can it accept the good of grace as a gift from God? Consequently, over time, theologians have more often adopted a reconciliatory stance, interpreting it as a middle path between goodness and evil, striving to accommodate the revelatory significance and ethical value of the doctrine of original sin to the greatest possible extent.

The question of whether human nature is inherently good or evil has been a seminal topic of contention among Chinese scholars throughout history, with a definitive consensus remaining elusive. Dating back to the pre-Qin era, a profound divergence of opinion on the

nature of humanity emerged within Confucian thought. Confucius himself was reticent about human nature's inherent goodness or evil, with the assertion that "His discourses about man's nature, and the way of Heaven, cannot be heard. 夫子之言性與天道，不可得而聞也" (The Analects: Gong Ye Chang 论语·公冶长 5–13).<sup>3</sup> However, he did advocate that "Man is born for uprightness 人之生也直" (The Analects: Yong Xe 论语·雍也 6–19), and observed that "By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart 性相近也，習相遠也" (The Analects: Yang Huo 论语·阳货 17–2), leaning towards the perspective that human nature is inclined towards goodness. The innate nature of a person is often manifested through a natural propensity for corresponding virtues, and the central concern of Confucius was to distinguish the caliber of scholars based on their personal innate preferences and inclinations. Based on these differences, he emphasized the importance of learning acquired later in life, thereby guiding the path to moral cultivation that is applicable to the individual:

There is the love of knowing without the love of learning—the beclouding here leads to dissipation of mind. There is the love of being sincere without the love of learning—the beclouding here leads to an injurious disregard of consequences. There is the love of straightforwardness without the love of learning—the beclouding here leads to rudeness. There is the love of boldness without the love of learning—the beclouding here leads to insubordination. There is the love of firmness without the love of learning—the beclouding here leads to extravagant conduct. 好仁不好學，其蔽也愚；好知不好學，其蔽也蕩；好信不好學，其蔽也賊；好直不好學，其蔽也絞；好勇不好學，其蔽也亂；好剛不好學，其蔽也狂。 (The Analects: Yang Huo 论语·阳货 17–8)

Mencius further articulated and substantiated the theory of the innate goodness of human nature, advocating that "The feeling of commiseration belongs to all men; so does that of shame and dislike; and that of reverence and respect; and that of approving and disapproving. 惻隱之心人皆有之，羞惡之心人皆有之，恭敬之心人皆有之，是非之心人皆有之" (Mencius: Gao Zi I 孟子·告子上 11–6). These four aspects constitute the virtuous beginnings (*shanduan* 善端) of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Also, "Benevolence, righteousness, self-consecration, and fidelity, with unwearied joy in these virtues; these constitute the nobility of Heaven 仁義忠信，樂善不倦，此天爵也" (Mencius: Gao Zi I 孟子·告子上 11–16), namely, the inherent nature of benevolence and righteousness is a kind of dignity and honor bestowed upon humans by Heaven. Moreover, Mencius's concept of nature specifically refers to the innate disposition that guides individuals toward goodness or the attainment of sagehood and virtue: "The ability possessed by men without having been acquired by learning is intuitive ability, and the knowledge possessed by them without the exercise of thought is their intuitive knowledge 人之所不學而能者其良能也，所不慮而知者其良知也" (Mencius: Jin Xin I 孟子·尽心上 13–15). Humans are endowed with both the innate competence and the innate knowledge. Mencius greatly extolled the moral nature of humans, i.e., "All men may be Yaos and Shuns<sup>4</sup> 人皆可以為堯舜" (Mencius: Gao Zi II 孟子·告子下 12–22), and articulated a profound emphasis on valuing, respecting, and trusting in the developmental potential of individuals. Furthermore, Mencius stated, "I understand words. I am skillful in nourishing my vast, flowing passion-nature 我善養吾浩然之氣" (Mencius: Gong Sun Chou I 孟子·公孫醜上 3–22); the quality of goodness is associated with *qi* (氣), and may indeed be constituted by it. For Mencius, the innate goodness of human nature is absolute, positing that the human nature is inherently good, rather than the completion of goodness or a tendency toward goodness. The act of "committing evil 作惡" thus is seen as unrelated to the original goodness of human nature; instead, it arises from the "abandon one's moral compass 放失良心" or is influenced by environmental and other external factors. In contrast, Xunzi proposed an opposing view: "human nature is evil; any goodness in humans is acquired by conscious exertion 人之性惡，其善者偽也". His rationale is that the nature of humans, from birth, harbors a desire for profit. Following this inclination leads to strife, and thus the virtue of modesty is lost. According to Xunzi, "From birth, they have desires for the pleasures of the senses, a fondness for sounds and colors 今人之性，生而有好利者，順是故爭奪生而辭讓亡焉" (Xunzi: Xing'E Pian, "On Evil Nature" 荀子·性惡篇). Following these incli-

nations leads to licentiousness, and thus the principles of propriety, righteousness, and legal systems vanish. “On Evil Nature” was deliberately devoted to systematically positing that the inherent nature of humans is inclined towards the negative, advocating for the necessity of ritualistic discipline and educational intervention to effectuate moral rectification, and refuting Mencius’ theory of good nature. The long debate continued until the Song and Ming dynasties. Figures such as Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085), Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) (collectively known as “The Two Chengs”, 二程), and Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077) were proponents of the doctrine of innate goodness, advocating the belief that human nature is inherently virtuous. Zhang introduced the notion of “the nature of temperament 氣質之性”, positing that human nature is fundamentally good, with this goodness being an intrinsic “the nature of heavenly mandate 天命之性” or “the nature of the cosmos 天地之性”. He likened the constriction of virtuous acts within the confines of temperament to the transformation of water into ice, where the original clarity becomes obscured. When the innate goodness is thus restrained, it is impeded from expression and manifestation, and then it gives rise to evil. To surmount this malevolence, one must alter one’s temperament, and to effect such a transformation of temperament, engagement with the Confucian classics is imperative. This doctrine adheres to the idea of good nature to the greatest extent and gives a reasonable explanation for the origin of evil, being therefore held in high esteem by a large number of scholars. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1030–1200) argued that “the nature of heavenly mandate” embodies the highest and most complete “principle” (*li* 理), which is supremely good and flawless, while committing evil is attributed to the nature of disposition and temperament of individuals. Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), in his work “Tianquan Lun Dao 天泉論道”, stated: “The substance of the mind is neither good nor evil, but the movement of intention is where goodness and evil reside; to know goodness and evil is the awareness of innate knowledge, and to practice good and remove evil is to rectify the objects of the mind 無善無惡之心之體，有善有惡意之動；知善知惡是良知，為善去惡是格物” (*Chuanxi lu* 傳習錄). And the faction that upholds the School of Mind (*xinxue* 心學) vigorously defends this proposition of establishing a nexus between cognitive perception and moral sentiment (Meynard 2020, p. 41); in contrast, the School of Pragmatism (*shixue* 實學), which opposes both the Neo-Confucianism (*lixue* 理學) and the School of Mind, counters Wang’s doctrine of the neutrality of human nature with the theory of innate goodness.

In general, the understandings of goodness and evil in Eastern and Western religions have differences in terms of being intrinsic and extrinsic, subjective and objective. When discussing human nature, Chinese philosophy seems place more emphasis on the direction and connection of goodness and evil with the heart, where the subjective initiative of the heart plays a crucial role. In contrast, Western religions stress that goodness and evil are objective, and whether the heart conforms to or deviates from these natural laws determines the morality of actions.

### 3. Aleni’s Interpretation and Integration on Human Nature: From Catholic Doctrine to Confucian Moral Practice

The discourse on the nature of humanity, as delineated by Eastern and Western belief systems, reveals a profound and multifaceted distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic, as well as subjective and objective dimensions. Eastern belief systems, in their exploration of human morality, are inclined to accentuate the intimate nexus between the concepts of good and evil with the innermost inclinations and connections of the individual. Within this framework, moral judgments are not perceived as external impositions but emerge from the depths of the individual’s volitional choices and the quest for intrinsic values. Conversely, Western religious traditions place greater emphasis on the objectivity and universality of the concepts of good and evil. Within Western religious contexts, the dichotomy of good and evil is considered an integral part of cosmic order and natural law, representing moral principles to which the human soul and will ought to conform. More specifically, the “original sin” initially found difficulty in being embraced by traditional Chinese Confucian thought, given the Confucian emphasis on the inherent goodness of

human nature. Within the Confucian intellectual tradition, the human being is regarded as possessing an intrinsic goodness and the potential for moral perfection, achievable through dedicated effort and the adherence to social and ethical norms. The Christian concept of “original sin”, which posits an inherited and universal human flaw, stands in stark contrast to this sanguine perspective on human nature, thereby complicating its integration into Confucian doctrine. As mentioned above, Confucianism assigns paramount significance to the individual’s moral responsibility and agency, advocating for self-directed cultivation of virtue and contributions to societal harmony. The Christian doctrine of “original sin” suggests an inherent limitation of moral agency due to a sinful human nature, which appears to contravene the Confucian valorization of personal responsibility and the self-cultivation of virtue. Furthermore, while Christianity offers redemption from “original sin” through the salvific work of Jesus Christ, Confucianism lacks a soteriological framework predicated on the need for salvation from sin. Confucianism is instead concentrated on the development of moral character and the pursuit of social harmony. Consequently, the introduction of a Christian soteriological solution into the Confucian intellectual system necessitates a profound reinterpretation and synthesis of the two philosophical systems, ensuring that the integration is both theologically coherent and philosophically consistent with Confucian principles. The positioning of human nature is the starting point for ethical and moral considerations, and only a consensus can lead to a convergence. Therefore, explaining the issue of “original sin” in a way that integrates with traditional Confucian thought became a significant challenge for Aleni.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1. Upholding the Tenet of Catholicism: Original Sin and God Bestows Spirituality

Intuitively, the most striking difference between Confucianism and Catholicism in their discourse on human nature lies in their foundational assumptions. Confucianism posits that human nature is inborn endowment and inherent quality. In contrast, Catholicism’s perspective is inextricably linked to the God–human relationship. The concept of “original sin” stands as a core tenet of Catholicism, and Aleni, in his interpretation, did not fully cater to traditional Confucian thought at the expense of abandoning fundamental beliefs.

First and foremost, Aleni partly acknowledged the goodness of human nature, yet this goodness was merely a “predisposition to good”, and after the fall of Adam and Eve, “innate evil” became an original point of human being’s life. The fifth volume of the *Diary of Oral Admonitions* (*Kouduo richao* 口鐸日抄) records Aleni’s words as follows:

God endowed human nature with the potential for goodness but did not predestine it to goodness. If God had predestined it to goodness without change, as fire is inherently hot and the sun inherently luminous, what difficulty would there be for God? And if this were the case, all goodness would be God’s work, and what merit would humans have to enjoy the blessings of heaven without effort? 天主之賦人性也，原使之可為善，而不使之定為善。如定之為善，永無他變。若火之定於熱，日之定於光，天主亦何難之與有？然此則為善皆天主功，人亦何功而坐享天上福哉？ (Li 2003, p. 542)

It is evident that Aleni did not accept the notion of “innate goodness” in traditional Chinese culture, reflecting his adherence to the core doctrines of Catholicism: God does not predetermine goodness and evil, especially not the goodness of humans. God is the epitome of truth, goodness, and enlightenment, but humans are not the source of truth, beauty, and life. If God were to bestow goodness and cause humans to spontaneously act with truth and beauty, not only would the credit belong entirely to God, but it would also deprive humans of the value of existence and practice. This analysis affirms the enduring Western Catholic perspective that the doctrine of original sin is fundamentally predicated on the concept of free will, suggesting that the capacity within individual to direct their actions is inherently a divine endowment.

Secondly, based on this, Giulio Aleni made certain adjustments to the doctrine of original sin. He attributed the distinction between goodness and evil in human beings to three factors: original sin, vital energy (*qi*), and customs:

If the stain of original sin is not removed, the integrity of one's nature is lost. Once enlightenment is obscured, desires become perverse...this is the first cause of the division between goodness and evil...The physical form inherited from one's parents results in varying degrees of purity in the vital energy, known as the innate qi. Since qi is the vessel of the spirit, some may be naturally gentle and harmonious, while others irritable and violent...This is the second cause of the division between goodness and evil...The places where people reside have different regional climates and customs, which lead to diverse practices and habits...which is the third cause of the division between goodness and evil. 第其原罪之染未除，則本性之正已失。明悟一昏，愛欲頓僻.....其為善惡之分者一也。形軀受之父母，則血氣有清濁，所謂稟氣是也，稟氣乃靈性之器具，或有良易沖和者，或有躁虐暴戾者.....其為善惡之分者二也。人所居處，五方風氣不同，習尚因之各異.....其為善惡之分者三也。(Aleni 2003, p. 338)

This division is essential in Aleni's interpretation and integration. He acknowledged that if original sin is not cleansed, it leads to the loss of the integrity of one's nature. However, he believed that "even if original sin is not removed, one can still do good 縱原罪未除，皆可以為善" (Li 2003, p. 63). The taint of original sin is merely a punishment from God, but it is inevitable that the taint of original sin influences the choices between goodness and evil. This approach adheres to the original Catholic doctrines while echoing the Confucian notion that the universe has a moral nature that is endowed in humans. At the same time, it lays the groundwork for the explanation that "people are capable of good" and can "do good", which is a key point to be discussed later in the study.

Thirdly, Aleni further clarified the relationship between human nature and the *Fall*: "when humans were first created, God endowed them with spirituality, enabling them to understand the principles of righteousness 人類之始生也，天主賦之靈性，俾通明義理" (Li 2003, p. 108). Here, Aleni situates the pre-Fall Confucian-like goodness, emphasizing that the spirituality (*lingxing* 靈性; or soulual nature, translated by Lin 2020, p. 57), namely, human consciousness of following the commandments and the ability of understanding righteousness, was endowed at the beginning of creation. It was only after they transgressed God's command that their descendants became tainted with sin. Thus, the sin here is not ontological that has presented from the dawn of creation. In Aleni's words, the spirituality refers to "original righteousness" (*yuanyi* 原義), which occupies a position analogous to the Confucian concept of "supreme good" (*zhishan* 至善). This largely allows for the possibility of a convergence between Catholic ethics and traditional Confucian ethics at their foundational levels. Firstly, both emphasize the innate moral consciousness, that is, the inherent human capacity to comprehend justice and perform good deeds. The difference is that Aleni sees "spirituality" as the original gift from God to humanity, enabling people to understand and practice moral commandments, while Confucianism posits that the "ultimate good" is rooted in human nature, reflecting the inherent goodness of human nature. Secondly, spirituality and the "ultimate good" both form the basis of moral action. Aleni believes that spirituality serves as a bridge between humans and God, and by following God's commandments, one can achieve moral self-perfection. Similarly, Confucianism advocates for the cultivation of moral virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness to reach the state of the "ultimate good". Thirdly, both possess characteristics of transcendence and immanence. Spirituality and the "ultimate good" are not only manifestations of an individual's internal moral sense but also represent a spiritual pursuit beyond everyday life. They point to a state of spiritual perfection that transcends the material world, reflecting humanity's aspiration for noble moral values. The profound similarities in moral philosophy not only demonstrate the commonalities in moral pursuits of the two ideological systems but also reflect Aleni's deep insight and wisdom in cross-cultural communication. Also, on the ethical starting point of human nature, Aleni delineated a domain for the "innate goodness" while also retaining the concept of "original sin". In matters of reward and punishment for goodness and evil, the ultimate concern of God was always placed at the forefront. These attempts, to some extent,

corrected the deficiencies of traditional Confucian ethics and laid a theoretical foundation for the promotion of individuality and the awakening of individual value in the practical learning of the late Ming period. This is because moral practice requires the exercise of human subjectivity.

### 3.2. Human Nature as a Moral Issue and the Impetus of Confucian Morality

With upholding and appropriately adjusting the doctrine of original sin, Aleni, by developing a localized theological framework through a process of intercultural learning, borrowing, and creative construction (You and Ji 2023, p. 1255), endeavored to steer the discussion on “goodness and evil” towards a Confucian-style practical morality centered on “self-mastery” (*zizhuan*, 自專), “sharpening” (*dili*, 砥礪), and “overcoming nature” (*kexing*, 克性), thereby effectively facilitating the integration and convergence of Christian and Confucian perspectives. Consequently, he provided a supplementary practical impetus to the Confucian theory of innate human nature, expanding the practical foundation for the “will” (*yizhi* 意志) inherent in the School of Mind. In this context, Catholic doctrine has demonstrated a robust capacity for interpretation.

#### 3.2.1. “Capable of Good”: Human Nature from Ontology to Morality

It is precisely because God does not predetermine human nature that the key to goodness and evil lies in human actions, which is what Aleni repeatedly emphasizes as “capable of good” (*keweishan* 可為善): humans realize their meaning through the performance of good deeds, rather than through divine endowment. The sin is derived from the loss of original holiness and justice, yet human nature is not entirely corrupted. Thus, doing good becomes a human achievement instead of a divine one. As he stated:

Do parents who give birth to children not wish for them all to be virtuous? However, if there are those who are unworthy and disobedient, this is the fault of the child, how can one blame the father? Human nature originally has no different endowment; God is supremely good, how could there be a reason to bestow a bad nature? Therefore, when humans are created, God endows them with knowledge of discernment to distinguish between goodness and evil. Each endowed with knowledge and capability, and is entrusted to exercise self-mastery. 父母生子，豈不欲皆賢？然有不肖者，此乃其子之過，何可委咎厥父耶？人性原無異稟，天主至善，豈有賦予惡性之理？故人之生也，天主賦以明悟之知，使分善惡。知能各具，聽其自專。 (Aleni 2003, p. 338)

Human nature, in its original endowment, exhibits no inherent distinction; the divine nature is inherently good, akin to parents of upright conduct who would not purposefully impart evil to their offspring, nor would they not wish for their children to be virtuous. The divine act is one of bestowing upon humanity the gifts of wisdom and the capacity for discernment—abilities that enable the distinction between goodness and evil, and the pursuit of benefit while eschewing harm. Contrasting with Matteo Ricci’s explanation in *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義), where the doctrine of original sin seems to inherently contradict the possibility of a good nature, Aleni adeptly circumvents this paradox. He argued that while God is the epitome of goodness, human nature itself is not inherently good. Consequently, he endows humans with the critical faculties of “knowledge of discernment 明悟之知” and “capacity for love and desire 愛欲之能”, essential for the enactment of good or evil deeds 善惡之為. The distinction between the Creator and the created establishes a fundamental divergence. Goodness is eternal and immutable, a divine attribute; sin, however, arises and persists within the created order and the flow of history, thus endowing humanity with the perpetual hope for redemption. As the embodiment of goodness and righteousness, God has granted humans free will, an agency that not only allows for the inclination toward good but also the potential for transgression. The faculty to discern right from wrong, to tell goodness and evil, resides within human judgment.

Accordingly, the determination of goodness and evil becomes a deeply personal and ethical matter, contingent upon one's morality and self-mastery. In this light, the dichotomy of goodness and evil transcends a mere question of human nature, transforming into a question of ethics and practice. So far, the human endeavor to discern and perform good acts represents a process of enlightenment and moral cultivation, aligning harmoniously with Confucian principles and the practice of morality.

### 3.2.2. Doing Good (Weishan 為善): "Skilled Governance" (Shanyu 善禦) and "Overcoming Nature"

In discussing the origins of moral distinction, Aleni's position is markedly evident, advocating a complementary argument regarding innate variances. As previously mentioned, he refrains from attributing the dichotomy of goodness and evil solely to original sin, positing it as but one element only. He further identifies "innate qi 稟氣" and "customs 習俗" as additional root sources. The endowment of vital energy, inherited from one's progenitors, is inherently variegated, ranging from serene and temperate to volatile and unruly, significantly influencing one's conduct. This perspective resonates with Confucian assertions that the moral inclinations of nature stem from heavenly endowment and aligns with Zhang Zai's discourse on "the nature of temperament". Additionally, the diverse customs and ethos of one's environment inevitably shape an individual's habits and psyche, underscoring the formative impact of external milieu on human nature. Continuing in his exposition on "repentance and the embrace of virtue 改過遷善", Aleni expands upon this theme in response to Ye Xianggao 葉向高<sup>6</sup> (1559–1627)'s proposition that "despite diverse temperaments and habits, the transformation from the unvirtuous to the virtuous is indeed the revered and essential path 氣質習慣雖不同，然不善者改而之善，固欽崇要道也" (Aleni 2003, p. 339). Aleni likens the influence of temperament and habit on moral actions to a traveler's experience with horses, distinguishing between a fine steed and an inferior mount: the virtuous "noble horse" moves unencumbered and ride easy, while the inferior one is hard to manage. Here lies "skilled governance", where one adept in equestrianism can "overcome self and restore propriety, strive unceasingly for self-improvement 克己復禮、自強不息", thereby "transforming one's temperament 變化氣質" and ultimately achieving "moral virtue 以抵成德". In contrast, "indulging emotions and conforming to the crowd readily 任情放逸，隨俗成非" provides a nurturing ground for evil. Through such moral praxis of "riding or governance", one may ultimately be "guiding education and cultivation"; realizing "peaceful governance, harmonious relations 主持教化，政平俗美，上下和樂"; and finally construct a "prosperous and tranquil society 熙熙穆穆" (Aleni 2003, p. 339). It is evident that this is an interpretation of Catholicism's "doing good" in the manner of Neo-Confucianism: it revolves around the pursuit of moral excellence through self-reflection, self-discipline, and adherence to social and ethical norms, ultimately aiming to achieve harmony with the cosmic order, and these are precisely the philosophy and path of practice that has been repeatedly emphasized by Neo-Confucianists such as Zhu Xi.

Meanwhile, Aleni's interpretation on the source of evil transcends the libertarian idea of free will in Western culture. He proposed that "the only endowed beauty in nature must also spontaneously cultivate people a benevolent heart, and then reward and punishment will follow. Now the ancestors, with their beauty in nature, only failed to purify their hearts for good, which led to the violation of the divine command and severe punishment. How can this be blamed on the initial endowment? 惟賦之美性，又必令其自發善心，始以賞罰隨之。今原祖挾其美性，只為不純心於善，致犯主命，而受重罰，會何咎厥賦之初乎?" (Li 2003, p. 542). Here, Aleni finds a nexus between the Catholic "failed to purify their hearts for good" and the Confucian ethical concept of "abandon one's moral compass", suggesting that the Catholic practices of self-determination, repentance, and confession converge with traditional Confucian ethics and morality. This synthesis is not an innovation or a baseless notion. As early as the 4th–5th centuries, the English monk Pelagius contended that original sin merely stripped humanity of the perfect moral archetype (Edwin 2016, p. 40). God's grace, inherent in cre-

ation, endows humans with the rational will to pursue good and eschew evil, enabling them to leverage their inherent nature toward goodness. In essence, the sin does not entirely divest humans of the faculty to discern right from wrong, indicating that through their moral capacity, humans can also aspire to goodness and seek God. Although this innate-goodness-based doctrine was a kind of universal moralism (or a theory of divine–human collaboration), its legacy endures. As a religion infused with ethical precepts, the medieval Church endeavored to sustain an equilibrium between redemption and good deeds. Aleni’s integration hinges on the principle that the distinction between goodness and evil essentially hinges on individual “self-mastery”, signifying that the moral character of a person is contingent upon practice and the exercise of reason in harnessing one’s innate nature, where reason epitomizes free will.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Aleni contended that the essence of moral practice lies in “overcoming nature”. Neo-Confucianism upholds the unity of all things and the essential nature of humanity, suggesting that humans are formed by the aggregation and dispersion of *qi*, without an ultimate benevolent sovereign. It advocates “following one’s nature” (*shuaixing* 率性), implying that acting in accordance with one’s inherent nature is the Way (*Dao* 道). Nature is equivalent to *li*, which is singular, and all things possess this principle. What *tian* 天 endows upon all things is *li*, and what all things receive is nature; essentially, they are the same entity viewed from different perspectives. To follow one’s nature is to follow the natural inclination of one’s being, which is the *Dao*. In response to “following nature”, Aleni introduced the concept of “overcoming nature”. He believed that the soul, endowed under the omnipotent will of God, was untarnished and wholly virtuous, and adhering to it was indeed the way. Yet, marred by original sin, human nature is corrupted. The current nature is an aberration from the original, it must be overcome to be deemed the way. The reasons for overcoming one’s nature are closely related to the concept of the goodness or evil of human nature. In fact, in *Kouduo richao*, Aleni’s arguments typically do not mention the idea of innate evil. For example, in a dialogue with the inquirer Xu Dashou 許大受<sup>8</sup>, Aleni first stated that “the *qi* is occasionally uneven”, which leads to the existence of evil. However, Xu challenges this notion, contending that an omnipotent and benevolent Deity would not be the author of evil; to do so would negate Divine omnipotence. It is at this point that Aleni introduces the existence of “sin” and its dangers, and it is for this reason that Aleni believes one should overcome rather than follow nature. Thus, “nature” here alludes to the nature that has fallen from grace, not the original, pure goodness. The aim of “overcoming nature” is the skewed thoughts and actions that emanate from this corrupted one. It is imperative for individuals to exert rigorous restraint over these tendencies. Aleni illustrates this concept with the story of St. Benedict:

When Benedict was in the prime of life, he practiced asceticism in the mountains. One day, when he was overwhelmed by lustful desires that he could not suppress, he threw himself naked into a thicket of thorns, rolling until his body was covered in blood, and only then were his desires quelled 本篤年方壯時，潛修山中。一日，欲念忽熾，苦不能禁，遂赤身如叢棘中，輾轉受刺，至遍體流血，欲念乃止。  
(Li 2003, pp. 425–26)

Hence, “overcoming nature” is fundamentally about subjugating the carnal desires of the body. Aleni’s work *The Norm of Penance* (*Dizui zhenggui* 滌罪正規) meticulously enumerates sins and delineates precise guidelines for their atonement, facilitating their practical implementation (Menegon 2006, p. 20). Furthermore, Aleni held the view that with unwavering self-discipline, the deviant thoughts and behaviors stemming from a corrupted nature would incrementally diminish, ultimately vanishing, thus restoring humanity to its original state of pure and unadulterated goodness. This is reflected in his words that “although human nature has been corrupted and its manifestations cannot be entirely free from bias, persistent self-overcoming will gradually reduce these to scarcity 人性已壞，其發之不能全無偏，然克之又克，終漸於寡也”.

The fact of the matter is that, on one hand, the ethical and moral norms of “overcoming nature” are not unique to religion; traditional Confucian thought, long before Neo-Confucianism, also places great emphasis on the similar concepts. In the Analects of Con-

fucius, Yan Yuan asked about benevolence. According to the Master, “to subdue one’s self and return to propriety is perfect virtue. If a man can for one day subdue himself and return to propriety, all under heaven will ascribe perfect virtue to him. Is the practice of perfect virtue from a man himself, or is it from others? 克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉！為仁由己，而由人乎哉？” (The Analects: Yan Yuan 论语·顏淵 12–1). As Zhu Xi explained it, benevolence is the complete virtue of the original mind; “Restrain” means overcoming; “Oneself” refers to one’s selfish desires; “Return” means to revert; “Propriety” is the regulation of heavenly principles. To practice benevolence is to complete the virtue of one’s heart (X. Zhu 1983, p. 131). Aleni’s ideas of “overcoming nature” follow the Chinese traditional idea that the heart as the center of one’s psychic powers or vitality (D. Pan 2020, p. 91), and the continuous practice of self-restraint, patience, and chastity are the process of constant struggle against selfish desires. For Confucian scholars of the time who emphasized “preserving heavenly principles and extinguishing human desires 存天理、滅人欲”, his soteriological ideas were understandable and acceptable, making Catholic ethics more compatible with Confucian ethics. On the other hand, these two concepts appear, at first glance, to be antithetical in their essence, as the former refers to a nature that has been corrupted and tainted, while the latter denotes a nature that is inherently pure and good. However, Aleni’s proposition of “overcoming nature” is a reinterpretation of the Confucian doctrine of the innate goodness of human nature from a Christian perspective, and these seemingly contradictory positions share a commonality: both advocate for the dominion of the spirit over material desires, with the ultimate aim and direction being the pursuit of goodness. “Overcoming nature” emphasizes the rectification of its deviations of the corruption to achieve the highest good of humanity. In contrast, “following nature” focuses the acceptance and alignment with this innate goodness to realize the highest good of humanity. The pursuit of the “supreme good” emerges as another common ground where Aleni converges with the thought of Neo-Confucianism.

Through Aleni’s integration, it shows that the ethical and moral practice represents a viable pathway for the integration of religion into Chinese culture. Aleni’s missionary content underwent a transformative process, shifting from theological metaphysics to the practical realm of ethics (F.-c. Pan 2013, p. 137). His interpretation towards moral practice, particularly in its convergence with the ethical thought of Neo-Confucianism, brings the doctrines closer to the daily lives and moral cultivation of individuals. If the localization of metaphysical doctrines has enhanced the acceptability of Catholicism in China, then Aleni’s approach to integrating Catholic moral teachings with traditional Chinese ethics undoubtedly increases practicability for the acculturation of Catholicism into Chinese tradition. This is significant because the commitment of religious adherents to their faith is, to a considerable extent, realized through the practice of religious ethics and morality. This approach emphasized the cultural dimensions of ethics and morality, integrating them into the wider cultural fabric for cultural enrichment and practical engagement. This perspective, which transcends mere religious dogma, offers a framework for intercultural and interreligious dialogue that is both profound and pragmatic.

### 3.2.3. The Power of Religious Doctrine: As the Confucian Practical Impetus

The wisdom of Giulio Aleni in addressing the debate on goodness and evil lies in his approach that, on one hand, views original sin as a foundation for free will. This posits that the power to govern one’s actions is a divine endowment, thereby imposing a stringent moral pressure and an inescapable moral responsibility on individuals. It emphasizes the constant reinforcement of personal moral agency, which is a distinctive contribution to Western ethical culture. On the other hand, Aleni preserves the essence of Neo-Confucian and School of Mind on the innate goodness and evil and the significance of moral self-discipline. Based on this, more importantly, he bridges the gap in moral practicality that is often lacking in these philosophical schools. Ye Xianggao also recognized this issue but was unable to propose a solution, stating, “When good people suffer misfortune, if we attribute it solely to the workings of fate and heavenly Li, we may find ourselves at

a loss to further inquire into the reasons 善人遭禍，吾儒直以為氣數所遭若盡屬之天理，恐理窮而不可究詰矣” (Aleni 2003, p. 335).

Chinese traditional culture primarily exists in the form of value rationality. The “li” that Ye refers to as needing to be exhausted is the innate knowledge and ability, and relying solely on following this principle is insufficient to explain the causes of misfortune. From Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179 BC–104 BC) to Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism<sup>9</sup>, the “good” attributed to heavenly Li is essentially based on the understanding that ethical norms are part of the divine mandate. People should recognize and consciously conform to and obey these heavenly principles. However, the “good” here is not a practice of autonomy but rather an inherent quality, which makes its impetus of moral practicality rather weak. Broadly speaking, Chinese culture relies on the “self-determination” of the individual in education—namely, self-reliance and moral cultivation, rather than the power of religious commandments. However, Aleni’s ingenuity lies in his recognition that Neo-Confucianism and the School of Mind regard the goodness and evil as a natural expression, which is important for moral self-discipline but limited in explanation. He argues that attributing fortune and misfortune to fate is not sufficient, stating, “How can we trust in the hidden goodness of people while doubting the manifest justice of the God and attributing it to fate? 安得信人之隱善，而致疑於上主之顯義，委之氣數耶？” (Aleni 2003, p. 336).

If self-discipline is the goal achieved by moral agency, then Aleni offers not only the foundational principles but also the impetus necessary for the enactment of moral practice. This approach underscores the significance of religion in shaping and nurturing the individual’s ethical conduct. The discourse on human nature transcends the mere debate on inherent goodness or evil, extending into a deeper exploration of the essence of humanity and behavioral education. The integration and mutual reinforcement of these perspectives are profoundly significant, as they converge on the similar practical effects of fostering personal perfection, advocating the adherence to moral norms, and striving for the purification and cultivation of the human spirit to attain moral ideals. Aleni’s interpretation gives a profound driven force for the Confucian tradition of inner virtue cultivation, i.e., Catholic aspiration of “sanctification”, indicating an ultimate pursuit of moral and spiritual refinement.

The late Ming intellectual sphere’s subjective determination of the innate knowledge led to a widespread deficiency in the understanding of the intrinsic values of human life. Consequently, Catholicism, which is primarily focused on transcending earthly life and aspiring to the afterlife, played a unique role in rectifying the social values and behavioral norms of that era. The goodness of human nature is affirmed by recovering the significance of the image of God for the Christian doctrine (Cai 2022, p. 691). The ethical teachings of Catholicism incorporate a foundational element of faith that is not typically present in Chinese ethical thought. Without the grace of God, the ethical and moral framework would be devoid of its origin. Without the prospect of redemption, morality is perceived as lacking a destination that gives meaning and purpose to one’s moral journey. The practicality and sanctity of ethics are two sides of the same coin; whether it is doing good or practicing benevolence, Confucianism demands a high level of self-reflection and adherence to norms from individuals. The lack of sacred significance harbors the risk of ethical instrumentalization. The pursuit of the beyond in Catholicism, while not excluding the illusory neglect of the present, focusing solely on individual sanctity and neglecting sociality, is also contrary to the fundamental function of morality. Through such elucidation, interreligious dialogue participants can reflect on their own religious traditions from the perspective of other religions. For instance, Christianity might attempt to reflect on its own tradition through the proactive and dynamic view of human nature in Confucianism. On the other hand, Eastern religions might also try to consider the external objective standards of goodness and evil from the perspective of natural law.

### 3.3. *Transcending Confucianism: Ultimate Concern and the Transcendence*

It must be acknowledged that the idea of Confucian human nature, which emphasizes an inherent capacity for transcendence, has its fundamental flaws. The belief in the self-

sufficiency of human nature and the potential for everyone to become a sage-like figure, as advocated by Wang Yangming, suggests a ubiquity of sagehood that can lead to a complacency in moral behavior. This perspective may obscure the inherent limitations and subjective understandings of human nature. In contrast, Catholic thought, while recognizing the divine endowment of humanity with goodness, negates the infiniteness of moral life through the doctrine of original sin. It posits that redemption through divine intervention serves as an external transcendence, guiding humanity towards moral goodness. This offers a beneficial complement to Confucianism, potentially allowing for mutual enlightenment. Aleni's interpretation of transcending Confucianism, characterized by a focus on value rationality, is further exemplified in his discussion on "evil", particularly the issue of "punishing evil". Confucianism has long emphasized adherence to heavenly principles and ancient ways, with an unwavering focus on the capacity for moral introspection. *The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong 中庸)* clearly states that "nothing is more visible than what is hidden, and nothing is more manifest than what is minute; therefore, the gentleman should be watchful when alone 莫見乎隱，莫顯乎微，故君子慎其獨也". The aim, as articulated by Zhu Xi, is to "seek within oneself and attain it, to rid oneself of selfish desires, and to fulfill one's innate goodness 反求諸身而自得之，以去夫外誘之私，而充其本然之善" (X. Zhu 1983, p. 63). This form of moral cultivation, which emphasizes individual agency, places high demands on one's capacity for self-reflection and adherence to norms, yet it also raises practical issues: the lack of clear standards for good, insufficient deterrent against evil, and a lack of persuasive explanation for punishing evil. As Lu Jiuyuan stated, "The universe is my mind, and my mind is the universe 宇宙便是吾心，吾心便是宇宙" (*Collected Works of Lu Jiuyuan: Chronology 陸九淵集·年譜*). In the philosophy of Wang Yangming, the "mind" even becomes the highest entity. Consequently, everyone may interpret the essence of "good" according to their own standards of mind, complicating the judgment of good itself. If such understanding is inadequate or deliberately distorted, leading to actions that are condoned, it can result in moral transgressions in practice, as not everyone can become the paragons of virtue advocated by society. Hypocritical individuals can thrive in such a "pseudo-moral" system: outwardly conforming to moral standards while inwardly engaging in deceit and betrayal. During discussions with Aleni, Ye Xianggao explicitly pointed out this issue and inquired about the Catholic solution:

We know that the rewards and punishments for goodness and evil are indeed precise, but who can see them in the unseen realm? Moreover, a single evil person may harm many good people. Why not punish them openly to instill fear? Should not the good also receive their rewards openly to encourage and motivate common people to do good and deter them from evil? 善惡之報，固知不忒，然冥冥中孰能見之？且一惡人，不知害幾善人，胡不懲於昭昭，俾有所儆畏？其善者，亦必食報於昭昭，俾有所激勸庶人皆為善，而不敢為惡乎？ (Aleni 2003, p. 340)

In addressing this deficiency, in the interpretation by Aleni, there is a fundamental difference between the Catholic "skilled governance" and the Neo-Confucian classical reading and introspective clarity: the latter is merely capable of discerning goodness and evil, whereas the former is positioned to eschew malevolence and extol virtue. The divine bestowal of free will upon humanity is intended to enable the attainment of moral excellence, rather than to establish the criteria for morality itself. In other words, possessing free will signifies the liberty to make choices regarding one's volition, not an unrestricted latitude of will, nor an absolute autonomy, that is, it does not confer the status of an absolute standard-setter. Consequently, the divine endowment of free will does not absolve individuals from accountability for their choices, for "goodness invariably brings blessings, and evil must bring calamities, either before or after life, all within the rights of the God 善必降祥，惡必降殃，或生前或死後，此皆天主所必兼用之權" (Aleni 2003, p. 340). This forms an interesting contrast with the traditional Chinese concept of "good deeds are rewarded with good, and evil deeds are punished with evil 善有善報、惡有惡報", which often emphasized the karmic retribution within a cyclical understanding of time and existence. The distinction here lies in the fact that the arbiter of this karmic retribution is God: "Since the creation of heaven

and earth, no one has been born without receiving the command of God to do good and avoid evil, and no one has died without returning to God to hear the reward or punishment. 自有天地以來，無有一人生而不受天主為善祛惡之命，無有一人死而不復命天主，以聽賞罰之報者” (Aleni 2003, p. 337).

Moreover, for Aleni, since the creator surpasses the realm of Li and Qi, creating and dominating heaven and Earth, then everything in the world must be the work of God (Xiao 2024, p. 851). As God is just, he must judge people’s choices, that is, “The God bestows the spirituality, commanding adherence to righteousness, without defaulting on the initial intent 天主必降之靈性，命之遵守義理，毋負賦畀初意”. Therefore, Aleni emphasized the impartiality of God’s judgment, emphasizing that God’s assessment of actions of human being is fair and unbiased; and in judgment, God displays his holy and just character in punishing the wicked: “Rewarding good and punishing evil, only in the Lord. The measure, pace, and delay of reward and punishment are without error 賞善罰惡，惟在上主。輕重遲速，毫厘不差” (Aleni 2003, p. 338). There is no overt indulgence in vice that escapes God’s notice, nor is there any lack of commensurate retribution.

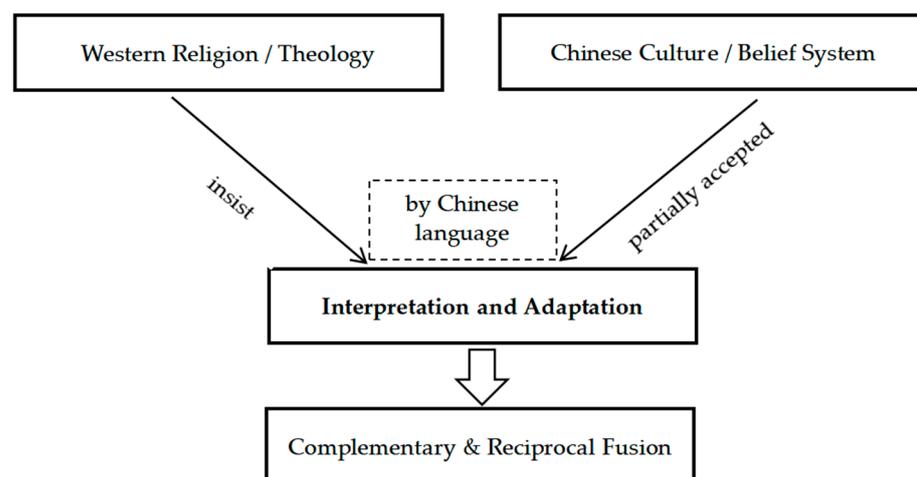
God’s discerning rewards and punishments imbue individuals with behavioral constraints and conceptual deterrents. The method of vigorously expounding on the significance and role of God as the dispenser of rewards and punishments also serves to affirm the infinite perfection of the religious theology: human evil is not instigated by God, but rather results from a loss of fundamental rationality. Precisely for this reason, the human hope and expectation for divine salvation appear so natural and inevitable. As Aleni states, as for God, he perceives even the depths of one’s innermost thoughts, he illuminates an individual’s entire life. Endowing humans with free will at the time of creation, God pre-ordained the path of redemption, enabling humanity to achieve complete righteousness through atonement, which is the eternal and praiseworthy will. Aleni clarified the role of God as the ultimate source of salvation, contrasting with the more impersonal or naturalistic conceptions of the divine in Chinese traditions. He emphasized that God’s grace is necessary for redemption and the attainment of eternal life, all of which reveal his elucidation of the fundamental spirit of Catholic doctrine, articulating Catholic eschatological concerns within the contentious context of Chinese traditional culture, which is the transcendent care for the purpose and meaning of life and the highest ideal of perfection.

Fundamentally, a transition from a religious to a moral ethical perspective reveals a profound and intriguing alignment between Aleni’s interpretation and the virtue ethics espoused by Confucianism. This alignment, while distinct in origin, converges upon a shared spiritual ethos. At its core, the trajectory from Confucius’s principle that “benevolence arises from the self 為仁由己” to the Neo-Confucian emphasis on “cultivating the heart and nurturing one’s nature 存心養性” and the pursuit of “conscience and the principles of *tian* 良知天理”, there is a delineation of a path of moral development, suggesting that the attainment of sagehood is within the reach of all, and it is permeated by an idealistic aspiration for moral perfection. For Catholicism, this ultimate perfection of humanity is a religious phenomenon, entrusting it to the omnipotent and benevolent God. Conversely, Confucianism perceives this perfection as an intrinsic, personal endeavor, consistently anchoring the ideal of human flourishing in the pursuit of virtue and ethical conduct. Through Aleni’s scholarly exposition, Catholicism’s doctrine of divine redemption is discerned as a theologically sanctified teleology of virtue, while the virtue ethics of traditional Confucianism are recognized for their quasi-religious, transcendent sanctity. Although Confucianism is deeply rooted in the secular world and does not posit that redemption from sin and the triumph over evil are contingent upon Jesus, its moral philosophy is predicated on the metaphysical unity of heaven and humanity, reflecting a distinctively Confucian religious sensibility. Consequently, Aleni’s synthesis not only identifies areas of potential convergence and mutual enhancement in moral praxis, as well as the functional value of human affairs, but it also underscores the shared ultimate spiritual quest for human perfection, the culminating purpose of life, as envisioned by both traditions. This scholarly endeavor thus offers a nuanced understanding of the interplay between the

religious and ethical dimensions of human existence, highlighting the common pursuit of an idealized state of being that transcends the secular realm while remaining deeply embedded in the fabric of human experience.

Aleni grasped the cultural nexus between Christian and Confucian ethics and morality, situating ethical issues within a broader cultural domain for culturalization and practical application, rather than pure religiousization. This approach provided a reference for the dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism that followed Aleni's efforts, extending into the early Qing period. Overall, concepts such as "skilled governance", "self-mastery", and "overcoming nature" epitomize the transcendental idealism of moral perfectionism: humans can achieve transcendence through moral self-cultivation, a transcendence that is anthropocentric and introspective, endowed with ultimate significance. The lofty standard of sacredness in the study of Catholicism exhibits a more pronounced transcendental characteristic, reflecting its ultimate concern for the purpose and meaning of life and the highest ideal of perfection. This is a theocentric and extroverted form of transcendence. Both the ethical virtues of moral world-improvement and the sacredness of religious faith demonstrate a humanistic concern and connection; thus, they are capable of dialogue and converging. By recognizing the shared humanistic concerns between these traditions, Aleni's work opens avenues for mutual understanding and enrichment, highlighting the potential for dialogue that respects the unique contributions of each tradition while seeking common ground in the pursuit of the highest moral and spiritual ideals.

Thus, looking holistically at Aleni's practice, from a cultural exchange perspective, his cross-cultural interpretation strategy can be summarized as follows (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Giulio Aleni's cross-cultural interpretation model.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, Giulio Aleni's legacy integrates religious ethics into Chinese culture with a transformative approach that combines Confucian moral practices with theological abstractions. By aligning with Neo-Confucianism, Aleni's work bridged Catholic moral teachings with Chinese ethics, enhancing the cultural integration of Catholicism. His emphasis on the cultural dimensions of ethics provided a pragmatic framework for intercultural dialogue, enriching societal norms and promoting individual moral cultivation. Specifically, his perspective corrected ethical deficiencies of Confucianism by affirming human nature's innate goodness within a Christian context, offering a unique role for Catholicism in rectifying social values. His synthesis of Catholic doctrines such as "original sin", "spirituality", "redemption", and "sanctification" with Confucian "innate goodness", "self-mastery", "sharpening", and "overcoming nature" laid a theoretical foundation for the sanctity and practicality of ethics. His cultural nexus between Christian and Confucian ethics positioned ethical issues within a broader cultural domain, fostering mutual understanding and dialogue. His work converges ethical virtues with religious faith,

demonstrating the potential for traditions to engage in meaningful discourse while pursuing moral and spiritual excellence. This way of integration retains significant implications not only for the reciprocal development and effective exchange between Christianity and Confucianism in contemporary contexts, but also for the mutual benefits and the constructive dialogue between heterogeneous cultures.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The study of “human nature” in religion and philosophy encompasses a rich tapestry of sub-themes. It traverses the debate on free will versus determinism, explores moral development through education and experience, and examines the nexus between human nature and the divine. Ethical and anthropological perspectives also add depth. This study focuses on the “good and evil of human nature” as a significant but singular topic amidst “nature”—a broader exploration of our ethical and existential landscape. Also, it has to be mentioned that in Neo-Confucianism, “nature” (*xing* 性) refers to the innate moral qualities bestowed by heaven (*tian* 天), serving as a moral blueprint for human conduct. And “human nature” is the actual expression of these qualities in individuals, emphasizing the need for moral self-cultivation to harmonize one’s actions with the cosmic order. The former delineates the scholarly context, whereas the latter constitutes the principal subject of this paper’s inquiry. See (Hacker 2020; Lewens 2017).
- <sup>2</sup> For a small number of partly related studies in monographs, see (Zürcher 2007; Xiao 2024).
- <sup>3</sup> The English translations of Confucius’ and Mencius’ works in this paper are quoted from the British Sinologist James Legge’s *The Chinese Classics* (Legge 1869, 1875).
- <sup>4</sup> Yao and Shun are sage-like and enlightened monarchs in ancient China.
- <sup>5</sup> Prior to Giulio Aleni, Matteo Ricci, upon his arrival in China, quickly recognized the importance of this issue. In an effort to underscore the potential for a rapprochement between Christian and Confucian teachings, in his famous work *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven* (*Tianzhu shiyi* 天主實義, 1603), he audaciously suggested that the Catholic God advocates a doctrine of innate human goodness. His logic was based on the premise that humanity was created in the image of God; therefore, the nature of humans, like their very selves, is born of God and is inherently good. However, the problem of this interpretation lies in the fact that, according to the original intent of the biblical text, it is incongruous to attribute an inherently good nature to humans due to the presence of original sin. Otherwise, the narrative of Adam and Eve being tempted and committing the original sin would not be rationally and legitimately explicable.
- <sup>6</sup> Serving as the grand secretary and known for his integrity and efforts to mediate conflicts within the government, Ye had interactions with Western missionaries, including Giulio Aleni and Matteo Ricci. He showed admiration for their talents and even invited Aleni to preach in Fujian, which helped facilitate the spread of Catholicism in the region. During Ye Xianggao’s resignation and stay at home in Fujian, Giulio Aleni had a discussion on various topics of Catholicism with him. Subsequently, Aleni compiled their dialogues into a book titled *Recording of the Discussion on Learning in Fuzhou*. For related research, see (Song 2018; Xiao 2024; Zhao 2024).
- <sup>7</sup> While it may seem that Giulio Aleni aligns with Pelagianism, this is not the case. His exposition diverges fundamentally from Pelagius’s teachings. Pelagius advocated for the notion that human beings could initiate good independently of divine grace. In contrast, Aleni’s interpretation is grounded in the belief that God’s supernatural grace is an indispensable element for salvation, underscoring the absolute necessity of divine intervention in the process of redemption.
- <sup>8</sup> Xu Dashou was initially drawn to the Catholic faith, but later he made an attempted to initiate a counter-movement. He insisted on the traditional Chinese concept of the “Three Teachings” (*Sanjiao* 三教) being united as one, emphasizing that the three teachings cannot tolerate a fourth, and critiqued Catholicism from various aspects including thought, culture, society, politics, and customs. Xu posited that Catholic attacks on Buddhism would endanger the authority of Confucian thought.
- <sup>9</sup> Neo-Confucian philosophy in China basically split into two distinct branches: the Cheng–Zhu and Lu–Wang Schools. The Cheng–Zhu School refers to a group of thinkers associated with and inspired by the writings of Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, while the Lu–Wang School refers to thinkers associated with or inspired by the writings of Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1193) and Wang Yangming. See (Liu 2017; Ivanhoe 2016).

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