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Free to Obey: Gao Panlong and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Selflessness, Fate, and Freedom

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Item Type	Article
Authors	Katz, Sophia
Publisher	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College
Rights	Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, Chung Chi College, Shatin, Hong Kong
Download date	2026-07-11 13:20:04
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/170692

Free to Obey:
Gao Panlong and Dietrich Bonhoeffer
on Selflessness, Fate, and Freedom

SOPHIA KATZ

Abstract

An analysis of the approaches to fate found in the writings of a Ming dynasty Confucian scholar, Gao Panlong (1562–1626), and a Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), reveals surprising similarities between Confucian and Christian attitudes to fate. Despite many philosophical and theological differences, both traditions accepted the understanding according to which fate, designated by the Chinese term *ming* 命 and the German term *Schicksal*, is not a mere power of circumstance, but involves the guidance of a higher metaphysical reality, heaven (*tian* 天) or God. The discernment of heaven's or God's "guiding hand" in fate is part of the process of

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This article was made possible by a fellowship at the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities, "Fate, Freedom and Prognostication: Strategies of Coping with the Future in East Asia and Europe" (supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research) at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the fellows and staff of the Consortium for creating an atmosphere of scholarly cooperation, intellectual openness, and mutual support. I am especially grateful to Michael Lackner and Richard Smith for reading the first draft of this article and offering their comments. I am also grateful to Wolfgang Kubin for drawing my attention to the complexity of the issues connected to understanding the concepts of selfhood in Chinese and European traditions and to Lauren F. Pfister, from whom I first heard about Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

self-cultivation, which also implies one's conscious efforts to restrain selfish desires. Different philosophical and theological premises affect the understanding of self in Confucianism and Christianity as represented by Gao and Bonhoeffer. Nonetheless, both traditions consider the achievement of selflessness and the dedication of oneself to the service of others as a desired goal of one's personal development. In Bonhoeffer's Christian framework, the presence of God's guidance in fate allows the person, under certain circumstances, to submit to fate believing that one is submitting to God's will. Such submission, which can be achieved only by a selfless person, is further seen as a culmination of human freedom. The term "freedom" is absent from Gao's Confucian philosophical vocabulary. However, the parallels in his writing to the ideas presented by Bonhoeffer suggest that Confucian submission to fate, when fate is perceived as "the order of heaven" (*tianming* 天命), can also be understood as freedom.

Keywords: Confucianism, Christianity, fate, freedom, Bonhoeffer, Gao Panlong

*To Lauren F. Pfister
who taught me with grace,
and whose influence on my academic career
remains decisive.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In his article "Holy Within and Without: Zhang Zai's Teachings of Confucius's Two Natures," Michael Lackner claims that in Zhang Zai's 張載 (1020–1077) understanding, the nature of Confucius, who embodied and epitomized Confucian sageliness or sainthood (*sheng* 聖), is both heavenly and human.¹ This implies that the process of Confucius' intellectual/spiritual cultivation, described in the *Analects*

¹ Michael Lackner, "Holy Within and Without: Zhang Zai's Teachings of Confucius's Two Natures," *Journal of East Asian Cultural Interaction Studies* 1 (2008): 25–40. The article discusses the commentary of Zhang Zai on the *Analects* 2.4.

2.4 as a linear process of gradual maturation that began at the age of fifteen and continued until the age of seventy, differs from that of other human beings. According to Zhang Zai, Confucius did not have to progress step by step, but only to come into fulfillment within his own heavenly nature. This was particularly manifest at the age of fifty, when according to Zhang, Confucius “arrived” at the heavenly calling or his own fate (*zhi tian zhi ming* 至天之命). Zhang Zai’s interpretation suggests that Confucius, the ultimate sage, is essentially equal to heaven. The only difference is that where the sage worries and cares (*you* 憂), heaven is indifferent.²

In what follows, I take these arguments as my starting point, while keeping in mind possible similarities between Zhang Zai’s idea of the dual nature of Confucius, and the dual nature of Jesus, who, according to the view accepted in Chalcedonian Christology, is “truly God and truly man.”³ I further examine some parallels between Confucian and Christian attitudes toward fate, as expressed in the writings of two representatives of these traditions, often described as martyrs: the Ming dynasty Confucian scholar, Gao Panlong 高攀龍 (1562–1626), and the Lutheran Pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945).⁴ I claim that de-

² Zhang’s statement follows *Xicizhuan* A:5, where it is suggested that the way (*dao*) gives “stimulus to all things, without having the same anxieties that possess the sage” (James Legge’s translation).

³ See the text of “The Symbol of Chalcedon” (451 CE), in Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical notes* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887), accessible at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeeds2.iv.i.iii.html>.

⁴ Gao Panlong was an influential scholar in his time, associated with the Donglin Academy (*Donglin shuyuan* 東林書院). In 1620 (at the age of 58), as a leader of the Donglin faction (*Donglin pai* 東林派), he found himself in opposition to other factions, especially to the court eunuchs. In 1626, he and six other ex-officials from the Donglin faction were accused and indicted. To avoid torture, Gao took his life by drowning in his pool. Gao and his companions are referred to as the “Seven gentlemen of Donglin” in Chinese, and as the “Seven martyrs of Donglin” in English. See Charles O. Hucker, “Kao P’an-lung,” in *Dictionary of Ming Biography: 1368–1644*, vol. 1, ed. L. Carrington Goodrich (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 701–710. See also Chow Kai-wing, “Gao Panlong,” in *RoutledgeCurzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, vol. 1, ed. Yao Xinzong (London: Routledge, 2003), 225–226; Rodney L. Taylor, *The Cultivation of Sagehood as a Religious Goal in Neo-Confucianism: A Study of Selected Writings of Kao P’an-lung, 1562–1626*, Dissertation Series, American Academy of Religion (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1978); Chen Cihui 陳慈惠, “Gao Jingyi shixue sixiang yanjiu” 高景逸實學思想研究 [Study of Gao Jingyi’s Practical Learning] (MA thesis, National Chengchi University, 2006). There are a number of journal articles in Chinese.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian who openly condemned the Nazi regime. In 1943, he was arrested and imprisoned, and later executed by hanging in April 1945. Bonhoeffer is commemorated as a martyr by a number of churches. For a

spite multiple differences in the philosophical and theological foundations of Confucianism and Christianity, both Gao and Bonhoeffer consider the attitude of submission to one's fate to be a saintly approach to life and reality when fate is understood as the calling of heaven or God's will, respectively.⁵ The development of such an approach means simultaneously progressing on the path of sageliness/holiness and acquiring freedom.

II. IN THE REALM OF FOLLOWING: GAO PANLONG ON FATE AND HEAVENLY CALLING

1. Opposing Desires, Understanding Heaven: Gao Panlong on Desires and Selfhood

Intriguingly, the attitude of the Confucian sage to fate is characterized by a certain tension between his worries, emphasized by Zhang Zai as a factor that distinguished Confucius from heaven and inward calmness.

bibliography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, see the database of the Burke Library at the Union Theological Seminary, available at <http://library.columbia.edu/locations/burke/archives/bonhoeffer/sources.html>.

Both Gao and Bonhoeffer had a significant influence on the intellectual and spiritual life of their contemporaries.

⁵ By "fate" I refer here to both the Chinese *ming* and the German *Schicksal*. The Chinese *ming* can be interpreted as "call," "decree," "order," "mandate," "fate," or "destiny." The German *Schicksal* has its origin in the Dutch *schicksel*, meaning "ordinance," "decree," "regulation," or "given fate." The term *Schicksal* first appeared in German during the sixteenth century, and had mainly negative connotations (that is, "adverse fate"). By the twentieth century, when Bonhoeffer used it, the term embraced the meanings of both fate and destiny. As a modern German intellectual, Bonhoeffer explains carefully what he means by this term. Its translation in the context of this article as "fate" does not present significant difficulty. The Chinese term *ming*, which appeared very early on the oracle bones, was central in Chinese philosophical discourse starting from the Zhou period. Unlike the German *Schicksal*, translating *ming* appropriately is especially challenging, because in pre-modern China intellectuals were rarely disturbed by the inclusiveness of the terms they used, but rather enjoyed the sense of sophistication and linguistic excellence the use of the inclusive term gave their writing. As a consequence, the term can appear in a variety of meanings even within a body of writings by the same author. In this article, I limit myself to two main translations: "fate" and "heavenly calling/command." While these two translations can be used interchangeably, sometimes only one of them is appropriate.

Confucian scriptures clearly emphasize this dual attitude; the reference to the worrying sage made in *Xicizhuan* A:5 exists alongside another statement appearing in *Xicizhuan* A:4, according to which the sage “rejoices in heaven and knows [his] fate/destiny, and therefore does not worry.”⁶ Commenting on these two seemingly contradictory passages (*Xicizhuan* A4 and A5), Gao Panlong explains that while the worries of the sage were caused by the sage’s concerns for the wellbeing of other humans,⁷ his ability to be without worry was due to his understanding of change (lit. [his ability to] “reside in the change”) and his following of the heavenly calling (*shun tian zhi ming* 順天之命).⁸ Gao’s emphasis on the importance of following the heavenly calling (or one’s fate) affected his understanding of the entire process of Confucian self-cultivation. Unlike Zhang Zai, who in his commentary to the *Analects* 2.4 concentrates on Confucius’ “arriving at the heavenly calling” (*zhi tian zhi ming* 至天之命),⁹ Gao centers his discourse around the idea of “following” (*shun* 順). He entitles his commentary “At Sixty My Ears Could Follow,”¹⁰ and separates the life of Confucius into two stages, before and after the age of fifty, and thus before and after the time when Confucius, according to his own testimony, “knew the calling of heaven.” Gao claims that the method Confucius used before he turned fifty was that of opposing or going against his desires (*niyu* 逆欲).¹¹ Progressing step by step on the path of self-cultivation, Confucius at the age of thirty was firm in his decision to oppose his desires, and at the age of forty, he did not have any doubt about the need to do so. Opposing his desires allowed Confucius to understand the heavenly calling at the age of fifty, which led him into a realm of existence that Gao defines as “the realm of following” (*shunjing* 順境):

In human life, there are only two ways: that of principle and that of desire. From the moment that [a human being] becomes conscious,

⁶ “Le tian zhi ming, gu bu you” 樂天知命，故不憂。 *Xicizhuan* A:4.

⁷ See *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 5.

⁸ “Shun tian zhi ming er ju yi ye” 順天之命而居易也。 See Gao Panlong, *Zhouyi yijian shuo* 周易易簡說, vol. 3, in *Siku quanshu, Shanghai guji chubanshe*, 34:151.

⁹ See Zhang Zai, *Zhengmeng*, ch. 11.

¹⁰ *Liushi er ershun* 六十而耳順. Zhang Zai entitles the part of his commentary dedicated to this passage of the *Analects*, “At Thirty” (*Sanshi pian* 三十篇).

¹¹ For a discussion of the Confucian critique of human desires in connection to the perception of “self” in pre-modern China, see Wolfgang Kubin, “On the Problem of the Self in Confucianism,” in *Confucianism and the Modernization of China*, eds. Silke Krieger and Rolf Trauzettel (Mainz: v. Hase and Koehler, 1991), 63–95.

thoughts arise, will moves, this [results in the appearance of] human desires. The teaching of the sage wholly used the method of opposing. What is this method of opposing? It [involves] following solely the [right] measure,¹² and not following what one's heart/mind desires. [When, at the age of thirty, Confucius] stood firm, he stood firm in this. [When at the age of forty, he] did not doubt, he did not doubt in this. Step by step, [he] followed the [right] measure, and so, step by step, [he] opposed [his] desires. When he reached the age of fifty, he understood the heavenly calling. This was [his entering] into the realm of following. And so [when he was] sixty, his ears could follow, [and when he was seventy], his heart could follow.¹³

The act of understanding (or knowing, *zhi* 知) the heavenly calling—which was prepared for by years of rigorous self-cultivation, expressed in opposing one's natural desires and submitting oneself to the norms of the “right measure”—was the central event in the life of Confucius. It marked a cardinal change in the nature of his existence: Instead of combating his desires, Confucius could now enter the “realm of following.”

Although, as Gao's interpretation suggests, Confucius' intellectual/spiritual progress did not stop at the age of fifty, his understanding of the heavenly calling implied that “the self” of Confucius now conformed to the heavenly principle and was rid of any selfishness. In Gao's view, achieving such state of conformity with the heavenly principle is what it means to fulfil one's humanity: He explains that while the heavenly principle is essentially present in human beings, conforming to it implies gradually adjusting to one's own human nature. Human desire, on the other hand, is an external element that is not an essential part of a human being. Conforming to it, therefore, can never lead to the fulfillment of one's humanity. The realization of one's human nature and the fulfillment of one's humanity by opposing desires is a proper way to sageliness:

¹² This is a reference to the original passage of the *Analects* 2.4 in which it is indicated that at the age of 70 Confucius could follow the desires of his heart/mind without transgressing what is right.

¹³ 「人生只有理欲二途，自有知識以來起心動念俱是人欲了。聖人之學全用逆法。如何為逆法？只從矩不從心所欲也。立者立於此，不惑者不惑於此，步步順矩，故步步逆欲。到五十而知天命，方是順境，故六十而耳順矣，七十而心順矣。」 “Liushi er ershun erjie” 六十而耳順二節, *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 4.

Seen from this perspective, the difference between the sage and regular people [can be summarized by] only two words: following/conforming and opposing. Regular people, from their childhoods, conform day by day to human desires, and therefore they oppose day by day the heavenly principle. The Sage, from his childhood opposes humanly desires day by day, and as a consequence he conforms day by day to a heavenly principle. The heavenly principle is something that humans originally have in [their essence], it is something that from its origin is “conformable.” Human desires are something that humans do not have in their essence. From their origin, they are in opposition [to what humans are].¹⁴

Although Gao’s interpretation of Confucius’ progress differs from that of Zhang Zai, there are similarities in their perception of what understanding the heavenly calling means. For Zhang Zai, Confucius’ “arriving at the heavenly calling” implies the full realization of his unique sagely nature; for Gao Panlong, Confucius’ understanding of the heavenly calling or his fate at the age of fifty suggests the realization of his human essence. Although Gao does not view this human essence as being unique to the sage, it is precisely the “arrival” at the point when one no longer has to fight one’s selfish desires that constitutes the qualitative change in Confucius’ life. Ceasing to have selfish desires and reaching the state of “no-self” indicates the attainment of sageliness, which further implies the realization of unity with other humans and, simultaneously, the realization of the virtue of humaneness (*ren* 仁). Referring to this idea in another passage, Gao once again emphasizes the importance of resisting one’s desires. In his view, Confucian self-cultivation is meaningless without this step:

Followers of the Sage (Confucians) teach their disciples through rites, asking them to [start] from [practicing] rites [and then] search for humaneness (*ren*). [The virtue of proper conduct in accordance with] rites and [the virtue of] humaneness, are [conditioned by a person’s¹⁵] innate nature. How is it [possible] then that when [one behaves according to] rites, [one] does not immediately become humane? I say [the difference] is only in restraining oneself and not

¹⁴ 「由此觀之，聖凡之判，只在順逆二字。凡人自幼與人欲日順一日，故與天理日逆一日。聖人自幼與人欲日逆一日，故與天理日順一日。天理者，人所固有，原是順的。人欲者，人所本無，原是逆的。」 Ibid.

¹⁵ In this article I use the term “person” merely to refer to “human being” (as singular of “people”). I do not discuss the concept of personhood.

restraining oneself.¹⁶ What is the self? The human being has a [distinct bodily and mental] “private self” amidst great changes; it is like a drop of ice in the ocean. This ice does not change until it ceases to exist. If it changes, it realizes that it unites in the ocean water with all that contains life in itself. If one does not restrain oneself, one can adjust oneself to [the rules of] rites; [in this case] rites will only be rites [. . .] If one restrains one’s self and returns to the rites, then rites (*li*) are [also] humaneness; this is the teaching of the sage regarding the [mental state of] no-self.¹⁷

Gao’s comparison of the “private self” to a piece of ice, which although essentially water is nonetheless distinct from the ocean, illustrates his understanding of human selfhood and Confucian self-cultivation.¹⁸ His statement suggests that “restraining one’s self” is a process directed toward eliminating whatever keeps human beings enclosed in themselves. Ideally, the piece of ice in the ocean melts, allowing the frozen water to unite with the water of the ocean. Achieving the sagely state of “no-self,” therefore, implies a transformation from the frozen and bounded “icy self” to a dynamic and flexible “water self” that is united with all other things and beings.

2. *Abandoning Plans, Concentrating on the Present:* *Gao Panlong on Accepting Fate (shouming 受命)*

One of the immediate implications of achieving the sagely state of “no-self” is the ability to fully live in the present moment, thus accepting heavenly calling through the acceptance of one’s fate (*shouming*). According to Gao, such an ability was exemplified by Confucius when he decided to leave the state of Wei for the state of Chen without any preparation or consideration of whether he and his disciples had enough provisions to sustain themselves. The ability to refrain from

¹⁶ Reference to the *Analects* 12:1.

¹⁷ 「聖門以禮教門弟子，皆使由禮求仁，禮與仁皆性也，何以禮之不即為仁也，曰克己與不克己耳，何以謂之己，人在大化中有箇身子，如大海中一冰，此冰是到死不化的，若化方知與含生之類同一海水，不克己即使能約禮，禮只是禮〔……〕，克己復禮，則禮即仁矣，此是聖人無我之學。」 “Keji fuli zhang” 克己復禮章, *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 4.

¹⁸ Although Gao undoubtedly perceived himself as a Confucian scholar, his argumentation was clearly influenced by Buddhist rhetoric, such as the image of the piece of ice that should be united with the ocean waters. Some other passages indicate that he was familiar and sympathetic with the Daoist vision of reality. See section 3 of the current chapter.

making plans and accept one's fate—to live in the present—was also a primary difference between two of Confucius' disciples, Yan Yuan and Zigong.¹⁹ While Yan Yuan refrained from making plans and ignored his material needs, Zigong had an inclination to accumulate goods. This means that Zigong “still did not deny his ‘private self,’ and therefore could not grasp [the meaning of] the term fate”:

Yanzi was often in emptiness (poverty) and absolutely did not plan/calculate. This is [what is called] “accepting [one's] fate.” Zigong could not yet forgo planning. He did not reach [the state] of being “often in emptiness.” This is [what is called] not [being able] to accept [one's] fate. “To accept [one's] fate” [means] that in life and in death one only listens to the heavenly calling/command. This is similar to what Confucius did when he “took his departure the next day,” [but then] “when in Chen [he and his disciples encountered] shortage in their provisions.”²⁰ Only Yanzi could be like this. Zigong accumulated goods and could not accept [his] fate.²¹

To accept fate, in Gao's understanding, means to live in complete obedience to the heavenly calling by concentrating solely on one's duties in the present moment, while disregarding the possible consequences it may have for one's own wellbeing. To be able to “listen to the heavenly calling,” a person has to develop an attitude of trust and reliance toward heaven, refraining from any attempt to control his own future through planning. According to Gao's testimony, this attitude, as practiced by Confucius and Yan Yuan, was uncommon among his own contemporaries. Juxtaposing his aspirations for life to the longings of the majority of his peers, Gao, as some Chinese intellectuals before him,²² emphasizes both the moral superiority of his way and his own

¹⁹ Reference to the *Analects* 11:19.

²⁰ Reference to the *Analects* 15:1–2. See James Legge's translation in *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover, 1971), 294.

²¹ 「顏子屢空全不算計，此為受命，子貢未免算計不至屢空，此便是不受命，受命者生死一聽於命，如夫子明日遂行在陳絕糧之類，惟顏子能之，子貢貨殖但未能受命耳。」“Hui ye qi shu hu zhang” 回也其庶乎章。 *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 4.

²² An example is Qu Yuan 屈原 (400–300 BC), who claimed that “There are no true men in the state: no one understands me” and that “All the world is muddy and I alone am clear”; “All men are drunk and I alone am sober.” See David Hawkes, trans., “Li sao ‘On Encountering Trouble’” and “Yu fu ‘The Fisherman,’” in his *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (London: Penguin, 2011), 78, 206.

loneliness. He claims that the primary mistake of his contemporaries is to escape from the present into an imaginary future:

What I strive not to do in this life, others cannot [strive] not to do; they are ignorant in heavenly ways, do not believe in the principle of stirring/action and response, try to quickly use the moment, and disgrace the ancient past. Alas! The only thing I search for in my life is not to sin against heaven and that is all. There are no other plans, and, in fact, it is impossible to plan. The sage said: "If a man takes no thought about what is distant, he will find sorrow near at hand."²³ Nowadays, all the sorrows/worries that people have near at hand come from thoughts about what is distant. The sage wanted people to exhaust humanly affairs, but nowadays people do not know how to listen to the calling of heaven.²⁴

3. For the Sake of Future Generations:

Gao Panlong on "Establishing Fate" (*liming* 立命)

Gao's above explanation of the inability of his contemporaries to obey heaven due to their ignorance of the principles of stirring and response sheds light on his method of scholarly persuasion. Thus he composed two prefaces to a new edition of a morality book popular at the time, *Tract of Taishang on Action and Response* (*Taishang ganying pian* 太上感應篇). Using his prefaces to this originally Daoist source as a means to promote his scholarly agenda, Gao suggests that while the length of one's life, social status, and wealth are predetermined and are a "given reality," they are only one aspect of what is called fate. According to Gao, this reality of the present is the "response" of heaven to human actions of the past. This reality is given and cannot be changed. Yet, there is another aspect of fate which refers to the human actions in the present. According to Gao, such actions constitute "the stirring" and affect the reality of the future:

²³ Reference to *Analects* 15:12.

²⁴ 「在我輩相戒為不為者，皆諸公相勗為不可不為者也。其要在昧於天道，不信感應之理，取快一時，沉淪千古。哀哉！我輩只求不獲罪於天而已。他無所計，亦不可計。聖人曰：人無遠慮，必有近憂。在今日，人有近憂皆由遠慮。聖人欲人盡人事，今人却不知聽天命也。」*Da Liu Qing zhi shuzhi* 答劉清之叔姪, *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 8.

In what every human being receives as a measure of his food and drink, there is nothing which is not predetermined,²⁵ all this is a response; this is an [aspect of] fate which cannot be changed. What every human being does [in terms] of good or evil deeds, each according to its [particular] category, all this is “stirring/action”; this is the [aspect of] fate which is formed/created by oneself. Since stirring/action causes a response, humans can become heavenly. If it were not so, then only heavenly commands would exist and not human acts/affairs, and the teaching of cultivation of the way [given] by the sages and worthies would be of no use.²⁶

To create the stirring that will positively affect the reality of the future is the essence of the sagely teaching. In claiming that changing fate is a real possibility not only for Confucius, but also for other humans, Gao makes it clear that to be able to partake in the work of heaven, humans need to become sagely, to reach the state of no-self and to act with no intentions. This implies that in order to be able to change fate, a person has to be free from his private wishes, including the wish for a better lot in life:

So, if fate is already fixed [by numbers], is it impossible to reach [into the fixed realm] and change it? [I] say: “Why would it be not possible to change it! Numbers are energy, energy is principle, [and] principle is heart/mind. The transformations of heart/mind have no

²⁵ “Mo bu qianding” 莫不前定 [There is nothing which is not fixed in advance]. In another passage, Gao referred to it using the term “fixed numbers” (*dingshu* 定數):

Stirring and response [that happen] amidst heaven and earth circulate unceasingly; the so-called fixed numbers which one cannot escape from, are all a response. The superior man exhausts the way in between [these given circumstances], this is the stirring. Response is the matter of accepting fate; Stirring is the matter of creating fate. [When] the Sage prays “to Heaven for a long-abiding decree [in his favor]” * it is [the act of] creating fate; My [life] is created according to fate, and fate is created according to my [deeds], but when one knows that “innate nature and fate [are] the entrusted outflowings of Heaven and Earth” ** yet does not know how to follow the way, he is not the one who knows heavenly orders/fate.

「天地間感應二者，循環無端，所云定數莫逃者，皆應也。君子盡道其間者，皆感也。應是受命之事，感是造命之事。聖人祈天永命，皆造命也。我繇命造，命繇我造，但知委順，而不知順道，非知命者也。」

Gaozi yishu, vol. 1. *Reference to *Shangshu* 尚書 [The Book of Documents], “Shaogao” 邵誥 [Announcements of the Duke of Shao], paragraph 10. **Reference to the *Zhuangzi*, ch. 22.

²⁶ 「凡世人所受一飲一啄，莫不前定，皆應也，命之不可易者也；凡世人所作一善一惡，各以類分，皆感也，命之自我造者也。惟即感為應，故即人為天。不然，是有天命無人事。聖賢脩道之教，皆贅矣。」 “Chongke ganying pian xu” 重刻感應篇序, *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 9, part 1.

special direction, but good and evil are different. Evil becomes great by being done with [a deliberate] mind; good is accomplished when it is done with no mind/intentions [to receive a reward]. The evil [that is done] mindfully/intentionally is quickly followed by disasters. The good done with no mind/intentions [for a reward] stirs the realms of the numinous. Therefore the sage emphasized stirring/actions [that are done] with no intention [of reward].²⁷ When one has this kind of stirring/action, the principle changes and the energy changes, the energy changes and the numbers change, and all these are transformations that come from one's heart/mind. This is the way by which humans can become heavenly, and [in this way] fate is created by humans.²⁸

To be able to affect change, humans have to learn from the sage. They should, like the sage and heaven itself, be able to act without attachment to the results of their actions, to do what is good without thinking of any reward, and to communicate with heaven in the immediacy of the present, without concerns about their own personal future.²⁹

²⁷ Having no-mind, according to Zhang Zai, characterizes the way of heaven and ensures heaven's ability not to share in the worries of the sage. Zhang Zai referred to it as follows: "giving stimulus to all things without having the same anxieties that possess the sage" is the way of heaven. The sage cannot know it, since the mystery of being with no heart/mind cannot be reached by means of having a heart/mind." Zhang Zai, *Zheng meng*, 3.8. For the translation of this passage into German, see Michael Friedrich, Michael Lackner, Friedrich Reimann, eds. *Chang Tsai, Rechtes Auflichten* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1996), 20. Commenting on this passage of Zhang Zai, Gao wrote: "this [saying] praises the mystery of the heavenly way of being without heart/mind. It is not something which the sage, who has a heart/mind, can reach. Yet, one must know that there is a way of resembling/mutual communication (*xiangzhi dao* 相之道); if it is not the sage [who resembles/communicates with heaven], to whom would we turn?" Gao Panlong, *Zhengmeng shi* 正蒙釋. This may suggest that the sage who has a heart/mind can resemble heaven by acting with no intention.

²⁸ 「然則命之既定者，不可得而易與？曰：何不可易也！數即氣也，氣即理也，理即心也。心之變化無方，而善之與惡殊致。惡以有心為大，善以無心為誠。有心之惡，禍斯速矣；無心之善，感斯神矣。是以聖人重無心之感，有其感之，理易而氣易，氣易而數易，皆自心之變化也。此人之所以為天，而命之胥由人造也。」“Zhongke ganying pian xu” 重刻感應篇序, *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 9, part 1.

²⁹ Such an understanding is also connected to the fact that the heavenly command was perceived by the Confucian scholars as determining not only the given reality of one's life, but also one's human nature, *xing* 性. See *Zhongyong*, ch. 1. As Gao notes elsewhere, while one's personal fate was peculiar to each person, human nature was common to all. Concentrating on nurturing human nature, this common and universal aspect of fate would create a positive stirring and positively affect the life of future generations. See “Jin qixin zhe san zhang” 盡其心者三章 [Three Sections on Exhausting One's Heart/Mind], *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 4.

Gao Panlong's conviction that selfless actions can positively influence the future of humankind shaped not only his views on Confucian self-cultivation, but also his attitude towards death. Believing that one's existence is not limited to the "private self," Gao considers personal death, received in obedience to heavenly commands, as an opportunity to affect change. As he notes, "Death is also the point when one can follow fate, and when one 'exhausts/completes the Way and dies'³⁰ it is also the point of establishing fate."³¹

Faithful to his own understanding, the moment when Gao felt that the Way of his life which was ordered by heaven had come to an end, he submitted to a self-inflicted death. When he was indicted, together with other leaders of the Donglin faction, and when it became obvious that imprisonment, torture, and death had become the lot of his colleagues and friends and his lot as well, Gao, according to records, smiled and said:

Thinking about this news, I just consider death to be a return. When the heart/mind is united with Great Emptiness, there is no life and death. How can we consider life and death to be two? If when getting closer to death, you change your mind [about the truthfulness of life and death being one], you fall into a pit. This is not the teaching of establishing fate.³²

III. BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND SUBMISSION: DIETRICH BONHOEFFER ON FATE AND FREEDOM

On April 9, 1945, one month before the fall of the Nazi regime, a German theologian and Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was executed in the Flossenbürg concentration camp on charges of being involved

³⁰ Reference to *Mengzi* 7 A:2.

³¹ 「死又是順命處，盡其道而死又是立命處。」“Jin qixin zhe san zhang” 盡其心者三章, *Gaozi yishu*, vol. 4.

³² 「此信想的，吾視死如歸。心同太虛，原無生死，何得視生死為二。若臨死轉一念，便墮坑落塹，不是立命之學。」 See also John W. Dardess, *Blood and History in China: The Donglin Faction and Its Repression, 1620–1627* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 108.

in anti-Nazi activities, including a plot to assassinate Hitler. A camp physician, who witnessed Bonhoeffer's execution, later testified:

Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.³³

Some of Bonhoeffer's ideas on fate, which shaped his attitude toward death, are discernible from letters he wrote to friends and family members during his imprisonment. A volume of his prison letters was edited by Bonhoeffer's close friend, Eberhard Bethge, to whom some of the most insightful letters were addressed. The title chosen by Bethge for this volume, *Resistance and Submission* [Widerstand und Ergebung],³⁴ reflects the tension that characterized the final period of Bonhoeffer's life: the tension between the need to both resist one's fate and to surrender to it.

1. Fate or God? "It" versus "Thou"

The letter containing the lines that inspired the title for the volume was written by Bonhoeffer on February 21, 1944. In referring to his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer expresses frustration over the fact that, despite people's concern for him, not much had been done to resolve his case. He reflects on the importance of taking action and suggests that it may be the lack of faith that, "hidden in times of security," reveals itself during turbulent times as a "fear of straightforward, simple actions, fear

³³ H. Fischer-Hullstrung, "A Report from Flossenburg," in *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reminiscences by His Friends*, eds. Wolf-Dieter Zimmermann and Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 232, quoted in Edwin Robertson, *The Shame and the Sacrifice: The Life and Martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 277.

³⁴ This is the title of the German edition by Bethge, published in 1951.

of having to make necessary decisions.”³⁵ Bonhoeffer then reflects on the question of fate and one’s attitude toward it:

I’ve often wondered here where we are to draw the line between necessary resistance [*Widerstand*] to “fate” and equally necessary submission [*Ergebung*]. . . I think we must rise to the great demands that come to each of us, but also do the commonplace and necessary things. We must stand up to “fate”—to me the “neuter” gender of this word is significant—as resolutely as we must submit to it at a given time. Only on the other side of this twofold process can we speak of “being led.” God meets us not only as Thou but also in the “disguise” of an “It,” so my question is basically how to find the “Thou” in this “It” (i.e., “fate”), or in other words. . . how “fate” really becomes “the state of being led.”³⁶

The tension between the attitudes of resistance to fate and submission to it, according to Bonhoeffer, requires flexibility secured through faith.³⁷ This is because fate, perceived here as an undefined power of circumstance and matched linguistically by the neuter gender of the German term (*das Schicksal*), could simultaneously be a mask covering the eternal presence of God and his intentional action in history. While recognizing the possible presence of an intentional divine action within the realm of human life, Bonhoeffer does not deny the power of accidental happenings. Not everything that happens to humans is an expression of divine will. Nor can an adverse fate always be explained by one’s own mistakes.³⁸ God, as Bonhoeffer notes elsewhere, “is no timeless fate.”³⁹ Unlike timeless and mechanical fate, God “waits for and responds to sincere prayer and responsible action.”⁴⁰ The challenge of every Christian is to find this listening, responding, and interacting God within what seems to be a blind and indifferent fate, “to find the ‘Thou’ in this ‘It’.”

In Bonhoeffer’s understanding then, there is no clear border that separates the domains of fate and God. They are not fixed, but rather interwoven, one within the other. Discerning between God’s “Thou”

³⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, vol. 8 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, English ed., ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 303.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 303–304.

³⁷ As he writes, “Faith demands this flexible and alive way of acting.” *Ibid.*, 304.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

and fate's "It" with the help of sincere prayer and responsible action is crucial for understanding when to resist and when to submit. Bonhoeffer does not perceive the submission to God's will as fatalism. On the contrary, acting in a way that resists what seems to be an adverse fate is part of the very process of discernment. Only after a person has exhausted all the possibilities in a struggle against the adversities of one's fate would it be justified to believe that he is "being led."

2. Discipline of Soul and Senses:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Desires and Selfhood

According to Bonhoeffer, the first stage involves disciplining the soul and the senses by resisting desires and wishes, thus enabling a person to discern between fate's "It" and God's "Thou." This discipline is necessary because following one's private wishes unavoidably leads a person into a state of confusion in which he is unable to be a "subject to himself." In a letter to Eberhard Bethge, written on March 19, 1944, Bonhoeffer addresses the issue of one's private longings for loved ones, as well as one's wishes for a better lot. He suggests that a person's ability to resist his wishes allows him to preserve the wholeness of his own selfhood, which would otherwise be destroyed by clinging to one's instincts and desires:

But isn't it an essential part of human maturity, as opposed to immaturity, that your center of gravity is always wherever you happen to be at the moment, and that even longing for the fulfillment of your wishes can't pull you off balance, away from being your complete self, wherever you are? In youth we are never entirely present, no matter where; that's part of the essential nature of youth; . . . A man is always a whole person and wholly present, holding back nothing. . . Wishes, when we cling to them too tightly, can easily rob us of what we ought to be and can be. On the other hand, when we keep our desires under control, again and again, for the sake of what we have to do in the here and now, we are the richer for it.⁴¹

A person who resists his wishes, according to Bonhoeffer, is not only able to be his authentic "true self," but also to be present for oth-

⁴¹ Ibid., 324–325.

ers, whereas clinging to one's desires makes a person incapable of living and loving fully:

Here I am surrounded almost entirely by people clinging to their desires, so that they are not there for anyone else; they don't listen anymore and aren't able to love their neighbor. I think that even here we have to live as if there were no wishes and no future, and just be our true selves. It's remarkable then to see how much other people rely on us, look up to us, and even seek our advice.⁴²

Escaping the reality of the present moment by either clinging to desires or longing for the possibility of change in the future, imprisons a person within his own limitations, keeping him from becoming his full, true self and being present for others. Conversely, a person who resists his desires and lives as if he had no wishes or future, not only fulfills his potential and becomes what he "ought to be," but transcends his own boundaries and is able to help others.

When emphasizing the importance of resisting personal desires, Bonhoeffer notes that a person's temptation to wholly abandon his wishes and thus reach spiritual perfection is no less dangerous for him than clinging to his longings. He describes the absence of desire as a kind of poverty and claims that a person's eagerness to renounce his personal needs in the service of others can paradoxically become an expression of selfishness.⁴³ Being selfless in the Christian sense does not mean neglecting one's own needs or one's own self, but rather accepting the reality of one's being in humility, realizing that "we are not Christ."⁴⁴ At the same time, it requires being able to keep unrealistic wishes under control and remain in the reality of the present moment.

Similar dynamics are at play in Bonhoeffer's attitude toward the issue of planning for the future. He notes that the circumstances of his life have brought him to a point where his ability to plan his professional and personal life "has come to an end," for "through the weight of circumstances, we have been put into the situation where we must forgo 'worrying about tomorrow.'"⁴⁵ Yet, he also makes it clear that abandoning plans and living in the present should not be a result of irresponsibility:

⁴² Ibid, 325.

⁴³ Ibid. See also fn7.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 50.

What remains for us is only the very narrow path, sometimes barely discernible, of taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future.⁴⁶

For Bonhoeffer, living in the present and refraining from planning means that a person can avoid longing for a better future for himself, while acting responsibly in the present in order to improve the future of others:

To think and to act with an eye on the coming generation and to be ready to move on without fear and worry—that is the course that has, in practice, been forced upon us. To hold it courageously is not easy but necessary.⁴⁷

3. *Responsible Action and Submission to God: Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Obedience and Freedom*

The ability of a person to overcome selfish desires enables him to act responsibly. According to Bonhoeffer, a selfless action, performed in obligation to others, is also a free action. It presupposes freedom from personal judgment about the moral or ethical nature of one's acts. As he writes, "As responsible action, the good takes place without knowing, by surrendering to God the deed that has become necessary and is nevertheless (or because of it!) free."⁴⁸ "Precisely those who act in the freedom of their very own responsibility see their activity as flowing into God's guidance."⁴⁹ In this way, selfless responsible action implies both freedom and obedience, for "in responsibility both obedience and freedom become real [*realisieren sich*]."⁵⁰ For Bonhoeffer, the ultimate example of a person who acts selflessly, in obedience and freedom, is Jesus, who "stands before God as the obedient one and as the free one."⁵¹ In Bonhoeffer's understanding, obedience and freedom are

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, English ed., ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 284.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 288.

⁵¹ Ibid., 287.

interrelated: “Obedience without freedom is slavery, freedom without obedience is arbitrariness.”⁵² To be free, the person has to act not only selflessly and responsibly, but also to offer this action and its results to God, in faith and in obedience to God’s will:

Responsible human beings, who stand between obligation [*Bindung*] and freedom and who, while bound, must nevertheless dare to act freely, find justification neither by their bond nor by their freedom, but only in the One who has placed them in this—humanly impossible—situation and who requires them to act. Responsible human beings surrender themselves and their action to God.⁵³

The ability to act selflessly and responsibly, disregarding one’s personal fate, is activated in times of danger. Bonhoeffer notes that under usual circumstances, people do not “interfere with fate,”⁵⁴ which, in his opinion, explains why they normally cannot act in advance to prevent negative occurrences. Yet, Bonhoeffer views precisely the ability to rebound and to hear “the inner calling,” which is activated at times “when things have become serious,”⁵⁵ as the decisive element of Christian life. As he notes, being Christian means “to take part in Christ’s greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ’s freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer.”⁵⁶

As in the case of Jesus himself, responsible selfless action, directed to the good of others, can be followed by negative consequences, expressed by personal suffering and even by death, which must be “accepted.” However, the act of accepting the consequences of one’s choice, no matter how difficult this may be, is in itself a selfless action that paves the way to the fulfillment of one’s freedom:

Not only action but suffering, too, is a way to freedom. In suffering, liberation consists in being allowed to let the matter out of one’s own hands into the hands of God. In this sense death is the epitome of human freedom. Whether the human deed is a matter of faith depends

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 288.

⁵⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 48.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 49.

on whether people understand their own suffering as a continuation of their action, as a consummation of freedom.⁵⁷

In July 1944, just over eight months before his execution, Bonhoeffer wrote a poem entitled “Stations on the Way to Freedom,”⁵⁸ in which he summarized, in a conscious and somewhat prophetic way, his understanding both of the path of a Christian and of his own fate. He identifies four stations leading to freedom: “discipline,” “action,” “suffering,” and “death.”⁵⁹ In doing so, Bonhoeffer expresses poetically what he described earlier in his letters and theological writings, that the path of spiritual growth of a mature person begins with disciplining one’s “soul and senses” by resisting personal desires, continues with selfless action, and concludes with a complete submission to God’s will in faith. In Bonhoeffer’s view, this is the path leading to ultimate liberation:

Come now, highest of feasts on the way of freedom eternal,
 Death, lay down your ponderous chains and earthen enclosures
 walls that deceive our souls and fetter our mortal bodies,
 that we might at last behold what here we are hindered from seeing,
 Freedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action, and suffering.
 Dying, now we discern it in the countenance of God your own face.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibid., 493.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 512–514.

⁵⁹ Bonhoeffer’s ideas on death (including a “self-inflicted” death) as connected to the question of human freedom were developed in his fundamental theological work, *Ethics*. According to Bonhoeffer, unlike animals, humans have an ability to dissociate themselves from their bodies and can thus either accept their life as a gift or offer it up as a sacrifice. Freedom in relation to death grants humans power against “fate-as-it,” “since by their free decision they can escape defeat through a self-inflicted death and so rob fate of its victory.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 197. Yet, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the victory of humans over “fate-as-it” does not cancel the existence of God’s “Thou.” The existence of God makes human attempt to overcome “fate-as-it” and to justify one’s life both unnecessary and wrongful. Human freedom in relation to death is misused every time when it is done not as sacrifice for others, but rather as an attempt at self-justification. Ibid., 196–203.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 514. See also 495.

IV. CONCLUSION: A COMPARATIVE OUTLOOK
ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS OF GAO PANLONG
AND DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

The discussion above shows that, despite the fact that Gao Panlong and Dietrich Bonhoeffer belong to different historical and cultural settings, their approaches to fate have many converging points. Both scholars distinguish between two aspects of fate: For Gao Panlong, these are the *ming* of “the given reality of the present circumstances” (the *ming* which is impossible to change) and “the reality of actions in the present” (the *ming* which affects the reality of future generations). For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, these two aspects are “*das Schicksal* of the unidentified power of circumstances” and the plan of God, hidden under the mask of this mechanical *Schicksal*.

The fact that fate has two distinct aspects affects the understanding of the ideal way of handling challenges in one’s life. According to Gao, the sagely approach is to accept the “given reality of the present circumstances” (*shouming*) and concentrate solely on “the reality of actions in the present,” aiming to “establish fate” (*liming*). According to Bonhoeffer, the right approach is to resist adverse fate when possible but then, when no other way is viable, to submit to the power of circumstance, believing that God’s intentions for one’s life are hidden under the mask of adverse fate. For both of them, the right action regarding the first, unchangeable aspect of fate leads to the right handling of the second: For Gao, the acceptance of one’s personal fate enables establishing of the fate of future generations. For Bonhoeffer, the resistance to “fate-as-it” enables one to discern God’s will and then submit to it in faith that this right action will lead to a better future for others. Both scholars claim that affecting future is predicated upon concentrating solely on the right action in the present.

The ability to live fully in the present, resisting the longing for a better lot in life, is seen by Gao and Bonhoeffer as an expression of a person’s maturity. Both claim that a fully developed person is able to reject his desires and thus fulfil his humanity. Being fully human means to be selfless. The true selfhood is seen by both Gao and Bonhoeffer in opposition to selfish desires, which enclose the person in himself, making him unable to experience unity with others (for Gao) or to be present for others (for Bonhoeffer).

In Gao's and Bonhoeffer's vision, selflessness is perceived as a virtue that resolves the tensions between the two aspects of fate and, consequently, between two ways of handling reality: resistance and submission. Absence of selfish desires frees the person from being self-centered: In Gao's vision fighting one's desires then becomes irrelevant, allowing the person to submit to the heavenly calling; In Bonhoeffer's understanding this enables the person to discern the right action in the present moment. Selflessness grants humans victory over fate and even over death, for death, received with the right intention may improve the fate of others.

Although achieving selflessness is seen by Gao and Bonhoeffer as the culmination of a person's development as a human being, their understanding of a person's selfhood differs significantly. This difference is derived from the different philosophical and theological premises of their cultural traditions and their different historical time periods.

Gao Panlong, as a Chinese scholar who lived at the end of the sixteenth through the beginning of the seventeenth century, perceived the unity between heaven and humans as the highest reality and an "existential truth."⁶¹ In his philosophical world, to be selfless meant to fully "dissolve" into the world of nature and be fully united with others. Reaching selflessness implied the dissolution of one's mental and physical "self" through unity with others. This dissolution is a gradual process, like the melting of the drop of ice in an ocean. The first stage is a "mental" dissolution of the self through unity with other living beings, which effectively cancels the differences in perception between one's own self and the selves of others. This was perceived as a sagely state of mind.⁶² This stage is then followed by a "physical dissolution" of the self through unity with the world of nature in death, which although canceling finally the existence of the physical sagely "selfless self," affects positively the metaphysical reality (heavenly numbers).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as a twentieth-century European Christian scholar, was guided by a different perception of reality. For him, God and humans—the creator and the creatures—could never completely

⁶¹ Truth in the sense that this is the real order of things.

⁶² For the analysis of differences between Chinese and European perceptions of oneness with the ultimate reality, see Rolf Trauzettel, "Abenländische und chinesische Mystik: Komparatistische und kontrastive Thesen" [Western and Chinese Mysticism: Comparative and Contrastive Theses], in *Komparative Philosophie. Begegnungen zwischen östlichen und westlichen Denkwegen* [Comparative Philosophy: Encounters between Eastern and Western Ways of Thinking], ed. Rolf Elberfeld (München: Fink, 1998), 255–270.

unite one with the other, for humans could neither *become* God, nor lose their own personal selfhood. Being created “in the image of God,” who is a “Self” and a person,⁶³ humans were perceived as preserving their self and their personhood even after their physical death. The complete merging of these two selves—the self of God and the self of a human person—was perceived as impossible, for a human person could never become God. Therefore, the complete unity between the two was also not envisioned. Rather, the ideal model of oneness between human and divine was that of union—union which preserved the distinct selfhoods of both God and a human person. Guided by these philosophical and theological premises, Bonhoeffer does not condemn human desires entirely. He understands that the wish to be free of desires can reach an expression of selfishness, when the passionate search for perfection is none other than a wish to achieve the unachievable: to become God. Bonhoeffer notes again and again that humans are not Christ.⁶⁴ Accepting this reality in humility and being careful in acknowledging one’s own needs, while controlling unrealistic selfish wishes, is seen by him as an ideal way of practicing Christian selflessness.

If so, the main difference between Gao’s and Bonhoeffer’s understanding of selflessness is that for the former, selflessness was literal: it implied the disappearance of the private self; for the latter, selflessness meant merely purification from selfish desires: it did not mean the cancellation of one’s private self.

The distinct philosophical and theological premises common to both Gao’s and Bonhoeffer’s cultural settings, also affected their perceptions regarding the goals of personal self-cultivation. The path, identified by Gao as a way moving from resisting one’s desires to conforming to the heavenly principle, made a person sagely and “heavenly.” Achieving sageliness through imitation of Confucius was a real possibility for every human being. A sagely person could, like heaven itself, “create fate” for future generations. In Bonhoeffer’s vision, although the possibility of “participation in the being of Jesus,”⁶⁵ is open to every human who follows Jesus on the path of controlling one’s desires and submitting to the will of God, the active imitation of Jesus does not allow the human person to become Christ. Yet, it is interesting that Bonhoeffer, as well, discussed the importance of formation in the like-

⁶³ See Yochanan Muffs, *The Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2005).

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 49.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 501.

ness of Christ, which “occurs only by being drawn into the form of Jesus Christ, by *being conformed to the unique form of the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen*.”⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer notes that even though such conformation cannot be achieved through one’s efforts, to conform with Jesus is possible “as the form of Jesus Christ himself so works on us that it molds us, conforming our form to Christ’s own (Gal. 4:9).”⁶⁷ Like Gao, who considers the state of conformation with the heavenly principle as the fulfillment of one’s humanity, Bonhoeffer claims that “to be conformed to the one who has become human—that is what being really human means.”⁶⁸

V. SUBMISSION TO FATE AS CONFUCIAN FREEDOM? FINAL REFLECTIONS

The comparison between the views of Gao Panlong and Dietrich Bonhoeffer prompts a further observation regarding their possible shared understanding of human freedom. The term “freedom” is frequently found in the writings of Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the importance of controlling desires and achieving selflessness suggests that human freedom in the Christian understanding is found not through liberation of one’s self from others, but rather through oneness with God and with fellow humans, and through submission to the will of God. As Bonhoeffer notes, “Freedom is not primarily an individual right but a responsibility. Freedom is not primarily oriented to the individual but to the neighbor. . . .”⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer understood the freedom of Jesus as an unconditional “being-for-others” and claimed that “only through this liberation from self, through this ‘being-for-others’ unto death, do omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence come into being.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 93.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶⁹ These lines appear in the commentaries of Bonhoeffer on *The Church and the New Order* by W. Paton (1941). English quotation according to Charles Ford, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Resistance, and the Two Kingdoms,” *Lutheran Forum*, special issue on Reformation (1993): 32.

⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 501.

Although a term for “freedom” is absent from Gao’s writings,⁷¹ his claims regarding the importance of controlling one’s desires and achieving selflessness resemble the argumentation employed by Bonhoeffer. This affinity suggests that human freedom, perceived as the absence of selfishness and the “being-for-others,” can also be found in pre-modern China. Confucius, who at the age of fifty understood the heavenly calling and, according to Gao Panlong, entered into the realm of following, reached that point when the human being is liberated from struggles with selfishness and freed from opposition to one’s human nature. He achieved the freedom that enabled him to submit to the heavenly calling or his own fate and follow it. He experienced the freedom that allowed him to realize and fulfill his humanity: the freedom found in obedience.

⁷¹ Classical Chinese did not have a term denoting this value. Chinese *ziyou* 自由 is a modern term. See Suzuki Shūji, “Religion (shūkyō) and Freedom (jiyū),” in *The Emergence of the Modern Sino-Japanese Lexicon*, ed. and trans., Joshua A. Fogel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 81–112.