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Item Type	Article
Authors	Yao, Jiugang
Publisher	Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (APTS)
Rights	All rights reserved
Download date	2026-11-05 13:56:19
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/170292

[AJPS 21.2 (August 2018), pp. 35-45]

The Chinese Concept of *Tian* (Heaven): Part 1

by Yao Jiugang (Stephen)

Introduction

In the 1990s, a Chinese young man, an undergraduate, indulged in sex during his final year of college. One night, after sinning again, he felt such guilt that he knelt down on the ground in a corner and called upon *Tian* 天 (Heaven)[1] in desperation: "Oh, *Tian*! If I sin one more time, strike me by a lightning!" Then, he stood up and went back to the study room. For the first time, his Christian roommate started to share the gospel with him, and he became a Christian.

In Romans 1:16, the Apostle Paul declares that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jews first and also to the Greek" (NASB). From then on, salvation has been coming upon other Gentiles, including this Chinese college student. Thus, it is clear that his salvation resulted from the power of the gospel, not from the concept of *Tian* in his heart, although he got saved right after he had cried out to *Tian*. Nevertheless, the affinity of his salvation and his calling upon *Tian* may still make one wonder—What is the Chinese concept of *Tian*? And did that contribute in any way to this young man's salvation?

These two questions are in relation to the Chinese concept of *Tian*. An understanding of general revelation is of great significance in understanding the exact meaning and function of *Tian*. General revelation indicates that God, as an absolute existence seemingly far distanced from humanity, is actually accessible to each person (cf. Acts 17:27). In addition, general revelation usually provides essential elements for special revelation to operate. For instance, Paul used the concept of "an unknown god" to introduce the knowable God and Jesus' resurrection to the Athenians (cf. Acts 17:23-31). Likewise, the concept of *Tian* functioned in helping this Chinese young man realize and admit

[1]All terms are in Mandarin (Chinese Pinyin), not the transliteration by foreigners or the Cantonese.

his sinfulness.[2] It provided an opportunity for the gospel, especially the message about the cleansing of sins by Jesus' blood, to touch and grab his heart. Thus, this paper will first explore the relationship between *Tian* and God based on general revelation and then will present the different views of *Tian*.

There are mainly three views of the Chinese concept of *Tian*. First, some people take *Tian* simply as a god in Chinese religions who is superior, equal, or inferior to other gods. Those who hold this view usually pay no attention to God's general revelation. Second, some identify *Tian* as the indifferent Creator who has no interest in caring about His creation, including humanity. Those who hold this view recognize God's general revelation but see no accessibility to Him through His general revelation. The "indifferent God" concept is popular among animists. Although China is under a communist government, animism is still prevalent. Hence, while interacting with the second view of *Tian*, this paper will focus on Gailyn Van Rheenen's description of how animists view God.[3] Third, many claim *Tian* as the Judeo-Christian God who is eager to reconcile the whole world to Himself. Those who hold this view emphasize God's approachability and accessibility through general revelation.

All three of these views of *Tian* have their advocates. This paper aims to examine the evidences for each one, then to argue that *Tian* is the *Yahweh* revealed by the Bible, who desires to have intimate relationship with all Chinese throughout Chinese history. Before presenting these three views, the issue of *Tian*'s relationship with God through the lens of God's general revelation, especially in human history, must be addressed first.

The Relationship Between *Tian* and God

Human history is like a code that contains God's mysteries for people to uncover. Although human beings are finite, it is not impossible for them to discover certain mysteries of an infinite God, because He enjoys helping them to find out things about Him—e.g., His eternal existence, His divine attributes, His elaborate plans. What God desires is that people will not come to just know things about Him but will eventually have an intimate relationship with Him.

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[2]It is difficult for Chinese people to realize and admit their sinfulness, for the Chinese culture seldom differentiates between the concepts of sin and crime. Thus, when called a sinner, Chinese people are often offended because they do not see the difference between sinner and criminal. One needs to pay much attention to this when sharing the gospel with a Chinese person.

[3]Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1991), 243.

People should not have difficulty in approaching God, for He is active in guiding them to find Him. In Acts 17:26-27, the Apostle Paul testifies how God takes the initiative to make Himself known to all humanity. There Paul tells us that God is not only approachable but accessible, which also applies to *Tian* (to be discussed in the following section).

The Accessibility of God

While waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens, Paul started preaching to the Athenians about the Creator God (cf. Acts 17:22-31). As to God's existence, Paul declared that God exists beyond the created universe as the Lord of heaven and earth who does not dwell in any place designed or constructed by humans (cf. v. 24). As to God's plans, Paul announced the final judgment through Christ (cf. v. 31). He also talked about several of God's attributes, such as His providence (v. 25), His mercy (v. 30), and His accessibility (vv. 26-27).

In Acts 17:26-27, Paul told the Athenians how God is accessible, saying, "And He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (NASB). Thus, one may conclude from this that people from each nation, at appointed times in their history, could seek and find God, for He never conceals Himself.

But how is it that God is not far from people? How does He reveal Himself to people? By what means could they seek and find Him? Unfortunately, Paul did not tell the Athenians how God is approachable and accessible. He did not provide any further explanation but simply directed his preaching to the main theme—the resurrection of Christ. It seems that the Athenians had no problem understanding Paul's points until it came to the concept of resurrection. Then, one may wonder, how did they understand the concepts about the Creator God that Paul introduced?

Don Richardson asks the same question in another way: "But where could Paul—born a Jew, reborn a Christian—find an eye-opener for the truth about the supreme God in idol-infested Athens?"[4] Richardson realized that the eye-opener Paul found and used was Epimenides—a famous Cretan prophet, whom Christians should be familiar with, for Paul had quoted his saying in Titus 1:12.[5] Epimenides was also the one

[4]Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), 20.

[5]Ibid., 21-23.

who left behind altars with the inscription "To an Unknown God" for the Athenians who had suffered a serious plague caused by this unknown god.[6] Fortunately, one of those altars just happened to be preserved until Paul visited Athens.[7] Thus, he was able to begin his sermon from the concept of the unknown god.

Richardson also identifies Epimenides' unknown God as a deity, but not a deity who has no name and is pleased when people admit their ignorance.[8] Indeed, to know the true God, people have to forsake their own wisdom (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-25). The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers with whom Paul debated certainly were familiar with Plato, Aristotle, and Epimenides and their works. Evidences also show that both Plato and Aristotle had acknowledged Epimenides.[9] Therefore, the Athenians to whom Paul spoke were probably also aware of the story about Epimenides and his concept of the Unknown God, not of an unknown god.

However, although agreeing with the existence of such an altar with the inscription "To an Unknown God," I. Howard Marshall does not seem to believe there's a real connection between "an unknown god" and the true God.[10] He comments, "Paul hardly meant that his audience were unconscious worshippers of the true God. Rather, he is drawing their attention to the true God who was ultimately responsible for the phenomena which they attributed to an unknown god."[11]

There are at least three flaws in Marshall's comment. First, he supposes that the Athenians had to be worshipers of the true God if they believed in the existence of an unknown God. Many people believe there is a God but never worship Him. Second, Marshall does not explain what the Athenians attributed to an unknown god and why. On the contrary, after reading Richardson's logical argument, one understands the Athenian's what and why attributions. Epimenides is the key that relates the Athenians, Paul, and Plato/Aristotle to the unknown God. Third, Marshall introduces a mission strategy Paul used to reach the Athenians, that being the concept that God is ultimately responsible for all phenomena in the world. However, the ancient Greeks never thought that the Ultimate Spiritual Being was responsible for things in the material world. Had Paul spoken of God's responsibility for creation, they would have scoffed at him, which is why some mocked him when he spoke of

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[6]Ibid., 9-15.

[7]Ibid., 15-16.

[8]Ibid., 14.

[9]Ibid., 21.

[10]I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* The Tyndale New International Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 286.

[11]Ibid.

the resurrection (cf. Acts 17:32). For Paul, to bring out the truth of resurrection was a must, but to raise the issue of God's ultimate responsibility for creation was unnecessary.

Therefore, a real connection between an unknown god and the true God is of tremendous importance if one agrees with Richardson's theory that Epimenides was the eye-opener for the truth about a Creator God revealed to the Athenians. That being so, Richardson is able to declare with confidence, "By Paul's reasoning, *Yahweh*, the Judeo-Christian God, was anticipated by Epimenides' altar. He was therefore a God who had already intervened in the history of Athens."[12] God's intervention in human history is what Richardson calls "the Melchizedek factor"—God's general revelation.[13]

God's General Revelation

Millard J. Erickson defines general revelation as "God's communication of himself to all persons at all times and in all places."[14] And He is always eager to do so. For instance, Richardson verifies that Paul has adopted *Theos*, which Xenophanes, Plato, and Aristotle used to denote as the Supreme God in their writings, and as the Judeo-Christian God in his own writings.[15] Perhaps all Cretans during Epimenides' time knew the existence of this unknown God. Richardson has insightfully illustrated how the Athenians were familiar with the concept of the unknown God inscribed on the altar through God's general revelation; and as did Epimenides, Xenophanes, Plato, and Aristotle.

Erickson points out three traditional loci of general revelation through which people may seek and find God: nature, history, and human constitution.[16] Chan Kei Thong also presents three ways of general revelation but a bit differently—nature, God's providence and intervention in human history, and conscience.[17] Nevertheless, what we are sure of is that we are not sure in which way(s) Epimenides, Plato, and Aristotle came up with the concept of the Supreme God or even encountered Him.[18]

We are also sure that not many would develop a sincere relationship

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[12]Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, 22.

[13]Ibid., 36.

[14]Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998), 178.

[15]Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, 19-20.

[16]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 179.

[17]Kei Thong Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers: Discovering God in Ancient China* (Singapore, China: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 2007), 35-37.

[18]Further research on writings about them or written by them may help achieve a deeper understanding of this topic, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

with God through general revelation. Chan affirms that nature is "the most vivid demonstration of God's general revelation to mankind."[19] Erickson also comments, "There is a knowledge of God available through the created physical order."[20] Hence, in Psalm 19:1, King David praises the Lord saying, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (NIV)." And Paul declares in Romans 1:20, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse (NASB)." Nevertheless, despite no excuse, few people truly seek and find God through nature. Even many literary writers praise nature rather than God in their writings.

Human history and constitution function more effectively than does nature, perhaps because God's judgment is more involved in these two loci. Both are interwoven in reality, for elements of human nature influence, or even decide, the progress of the history of human society.

As to the locus of the constitution of humanity, Erickson precisely claims that God is best perceived in the moral and spiritual qualities of humankind rather than in the physical structure and mental capacities of humans.[21] On the one hand, Chan notices degrees of moral awareness that people possess and identifies this phenomenon as conscience.[22] Erickson summarizes that this conscience is for Immanuel Kant the moral imperative, and for C. S. Lewis the moral impulse.[23]

On the other hand, the spiritual or religious nature of human beings is the key to their moral awareness because it answers why, and to whom, people should be morally responsible. Thus, a universal phenomenon in all cultures is no longer an enigma. Erickson describes this phenomenon as follows: "In all cultures, at all times and places, humans have believed in the existence of a higher reality than themselves, and even of something higher than the human race collectively."[24] This is true, for Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that God has set eternity in the hearts of all human beings. After having studied evidences of belief in the One True God in hundreds of cultures, Richardson proves this phenomenon and declares that God even prepares the Gentiles to receive the gospel.[25]

As to the locus of history, Erickson points out that the destinies of nations, and the preservation of Israel, clearly demonstrate how God

[19]Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 35.
[20]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 179.
[21]Ibid., 180.
[22]Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 37.
[23]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 180.
[24]Ibid., 180.
[25]Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, 33.

moves the course of human history.[26] Chan also assures divine intervention in the rise and fall of the kingdoms or dynasties in China's history.[27] Just as the unknown God intervened in the history of Athens, the Chinese also believe that a deity intervened in the history of China. But who is this deity? Does He still intervene in modern China? And if so, how did/does He intervene?

Tian and God

The answers to the above questions mostly lie in the Chinese concept of *Tian*. God as *Tian* appears to the *Han* 汉Chinese[28] and intervenes in the history of China through the concept of *Tianming* 天命 (the Mandate of Heaven, which will be discussed in the next section).

The Meaning of *Tian*

Although the Chinese term *Tian* denotes both Heaven and the sky, almost every Chinese understands *Tian* as Heaven—the Great One God in a religious sense. As Chan states, "As for the name 天 (Tian), or Heaven, few would dispute that it can be used to refer to God."[29] He goes on to explain, "Such a meaning is reflected in the original pictograph of the character Tian, which is comprised of 'one', 一, who is over or above 'great' 大. In other words, Tian is the One above the greatest of all."[30]

The concept of Heaven as the Great One is not unique to the Chinese but prevails in many cultures in both the Eastern and Western worlds. For instance, in the East, God's chosen people—the Israelites—occasionally call God "Heaven"; as Erickson verifies, "'Heaven' is a virtual synonym for God."[31] Craig S. Keener also states, "Jewish people often used 'heaven' as a respectful way of saying 'God.'"[32] Examples are common in the Bible. In the Old Testament, Daniel 4:26 says that the kingdom would be restored to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, only when he recognized that Heaven rules. During the New Testament period, Jesus spoke a parable in which the prodigal son confesses sinning

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[26]Ibid., 179.

[27]Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 36.

[28]*Han* Chinese is the majority group in China, with over ninety percent of the population. In this paper, whenever the term "Chinese" is used, it refers to the *Han* Chinese only.

[29]Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 84.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1234.

[32]Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1993), 233.

against Heaven (cf. Lk. 15:18, 21). In the West, it is common for English-speaking people to express helplessness by exclaiming, "Oh, Heaven help me!" Joseph A. Adler confirms that in English the word "Heaven" "can be used in a personal sense to refer metonymically to God."[33]

In China, the concept of *Tian* as the Heaven (the Great One) has been rooted in almost everyone's heart from ancient to modern times. For example, the famous Confucian Mengzi 孟子(Mencius) said more than 2,000 years ago, "For a man to give full realization to his heart is for him to understand his own nature, and a man who knows his own nature will know Heaven. The retention of his heart and the nurturing of his nature are the means by which he serves Heaven."[34] And in its introduction, this paper mentions the Chinese young man who in the 1990s, also cried out in desperation for *Tian*'s help.

The Origin of *Tian* in Relation to *Di*

Except for a small group of people who regard *Tian* as a more powerful god presiding over other gods in Chinese religions (to be discussed later), that *Tian* denotes Heaven or the Great One is quite clear, as was described above. Nevertheless, the origin of the concept of *Tian* is still highly debated.

On the one hand, some Christian scholars, such as Chan, tend to support an early origin of *Tian*. He writes, "According to *The Great Chinese Electronic Encyclopedia*, the use of Tian to refer to the sovereign Ruler of the Universe goes as far back as the Xia Dynasty 夏朝 (c. 2207-c. 1766 B.C.), China's very first dynasty!"[35] In fact, the concept of *Tian* might have emerged much earlier than the Xia 夏 Dynasty, possibly having derived from the beginning of the Chinese language or shortly after the Babel event (cf. Gen. 11:1-9).

On the other hand, most secular scholars suggest a later origin of *Tian*. Western scholar Daniel L. Overmyer, while providing definitions for *Tian* and *Di*帝,[36] comments, "Tian, 'Heaven,' was the supreme god

[33]Joseph A. Adler, *Chinese Religions* (London, UK: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2012), 27.

[34]Mencius, *Mencius*. trans. by. D. C. Lau (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2003), 145.

[35]Chan, *Faith of Our Fathers*, 84.

[36]Both the Chinese words *Tian* (or *Shangtian* 上天, Heaven) and *Di* 帝 (or *Shangdi* 上帝, king/emperor/lord) can mean Heaven, the Lord on High, the Supreme Being, etc. All of these words denote the Great One, who exists above all and rules over all, including human beings. The word *shang* 上 carries the connotation of "above all," so that it is often added as a prefix to *Tian* and *Di*. However, without the prefix of *shang*,

of the early Zhou people, superior to ancestors and other gods. Heaven's approval was necessary for rulers, who could lose it and their position if they were cruel or unjust."[37] The Zhou 周 (1121-249 B.C.) was the third dynasty in Chinese history, following the Shang 商 (1765-1122 B.C.) the second dynasty. The first king (Tang 汤) of the Shang Dynasty took over the Xia Dynasty when its last king (Jie 桀) became immoral; in the same way, the first king (Ji Fa 姬发) of the Zhou Dynasty took over the Shang Dynasty, when its last king (Zhou 纣) became wicked.

More radically, Mu-chou Poo presents how *Tian* of the Zhou people replaced *Di* of the Shang Dynasty:

> In order to legitimize religiously as well as politically the displacement of the Shang, the Chou (Zhou) ruling class transformed the Shang idea of Shang-ti (*Shangdi*) 上帝, or Ti (*Di*) 帝, who, although considered as the Supreme Lord, was actually more of a figurehead than one who commanded great reverence, into a supreme deity, known as *t'ien* (*Tian*) 天, "Heaven." The deity exercised arbitration over the fate of the people, not whimsically but according to a moral standard. The Chou replaced the Shang precisely because the Shang had violated the moral standard of T'ien, so that the Mandate of Heaven (*t'ien-ming* 天命) was transferred to the Chou.[38]

Hence, Poo declares that there was a gradual "change in the conception of heaven from amoral natural entity to a moral deity."[39]

Poo obviously believes in the secular social development theory, which holds that human society is a gradual development (from primitive to feudal to capitalist to socialist to communist). Several reasons prove Poo's theory to be incorrect. First, although the Zhou Dynasty overtook the Shang Dynasty, the concept of *Tian* did not have to emerge later than that of *Di*. Second, in the Shang Dynasty, *Di* was neither a figurehead nor an amoral natural deity. Xinzhong Yao and Yanxia Zhao identify *Di* as "the ultimate power over all natural and human affairs, from which issued commandments for human behaviour concerning right and

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Tian or *Di* is never weakened to denote the concept of the Great One, which has been firmly rooted in almost every Chinese heart.

[37]Daniel L. Overmyer, *Religions of China: The World as a Living System* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998), 123.

[38]Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 29-30.

[39]Ibid., 30.

wrong."[40] The concept of an ultimate power, or the Great One, has been prevailing in people's hearts throughout the history of China. Third, the Zhou rulers did not need to create a new concept, *Tianming*, to legitimize their governing over the Shang people. They simply told the Shang people that they had violated *Diming* 帝命 (the Mandate of *Di*). Moreover, the Zhou never abandoned the concept of *Di*. In the earliest Chinese classics, *Di* was still popularly addressed. As Hellmut Wilhelm verifies, "During classical times the two concepts were frequently used interchangeably, the one serving just as well as the other."[41]

Therefore, this paper supports the view of an early origin of *Tian*, especially because *Tian*, as Heaven or the Great One, contains the concept of eternity. Eternity has been set in the hearts of all human beings from the beginning of creation. Desiring eternity never vanishes along with the fall of humanity. The dream of *Tian ren he yi* 天人合一 (to be one with *Tian*) expresses this desire of many Chinese.

Seeking *Tian* and God

To be one with God is the goal for Christians. That goal can be fulfilled, for Jesus encourages us "Seek and you will find" (Matt. 7:7). Mencius also encourages, "Seek and you will get it; let go and you will lose it. If this is the case, then seeking is of help to getting, and what is sought is within yourself."[42] When the Pharisees asked when the kingdom of God was coming, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God is within you" (cf. Lk. 17:20-22).

The concept of *Tian* is within many Chinese. If they seek *Tian*, they will find him. As Epimenides' unknown God and Aristotle's *Theos* are the God revealed by the Bible, Mencius' *Tian* is also the Eternal God. Hence, if a Chinese sincerely seeks *Tian*, then he or she will find God! *Tian* for the Chinese is such a precious concept given as a gift by God. Nevertheless, not all believe that *Tian* is God.

In the Introduction, we have mentioned three major ways the Chinese view *Tian.* Those who take the first view see *Tian* simply as one god in relation to other gods. Others regard *Tian* as an indifferent Creator who is disinterested in humanity. Finally, there are those who regard *Tian* as the Judeo-Christian God who is very much interested in reconciliation with mankind. This paper takes the view that *Tian* is the God of the Bible.

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

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

[42]Mencius, *Mencius*, 145.

Summary of Part 1

The author discussed some of the important attributes of God. God preserved Epimendes' inscription, "To an Unknown God" which Paul used to open his sermon to the Athenians. Thus, the inscription served as an eye-opener connecting an unknown god to *Yahweh*. God reveals Himself to mankind using nature, history and people's spiritual nature; all cultures have an awareness of a higher being. This paper further examined the highly debated origin of the concept of *Tian*. We support the early origin of *Tian* since *Tian* contains the concept of eternity.

In Part 2 of this paper, the author will consider the controversy over *Tian*. Is *Tian* an idol, an indifferent God, or the Eternal God? Each of these views will be examined, with important truths brought to light.