

Chinese Religions

Intellectual Output 2, Unit III



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3	<i>Giovanni Bulian, Ca' Foscari University of Venice</i>	<i>03/03/2018</i>

Reference Digital Module and other materials:

- [Introduction to Daoism](#)
- [Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China](#)

(by Asia for Educators Program at Columbia University)

Introduction

The geographical scope of the various Chinese religious traditions is very vast: it extends from mainland China to South-east Asia and to the Chinese communities that are spread all over the world.

However, speaking about “Chinese religions” may be misleading, because it makes us think about separated and exclusive traditions with strict boundaries and exclusive affiliation. In reality this term is used here to refer to a **complex landscape, in which some well recognizable traditions can be identified**, with their history, texts, ritual practices and organization. These are the so-called “**three teachings**” of China: **Daoism** and **Confucianism** (indigenous traditions of China), later joined by **Buddhism**, which developed in distinctive Chinese forms. However, apart from this, we must mention the various aspects of **religious life** that are **shared by most people**, regardless of their level of affiliation with the three teachings, which scholars have put under the label of “**Chinese Popular Religion**”.

More information:

[Daoism and the other religious traditions of China](#)

‘Religion’ in China: an interpretative and linguistic problem

Delineating a historical picture of the Chinese religious tradition is above all a problem of using interpretative categories. **The use of the category 'religion' in its Western and post-Reformation meaning** (matter of individual belief and discrete dimension of culture) **is particularly useless** here. In fact, a term referring to this idea was practically absent in pre-modern China and only in the 19th century did a word appear (*zongjiao*), introduced initially by Japanese translators, to indicate the monotheistic religious model of Europeans. From a historical and etymological point of view, *zongjiao* would indicate ancestral or sectarian teachings (particularly in a Buddhist context) and has been clearly chosen with in mind Christian doctrinal orthodoxy and exclusive belonging. However, Chinese and Japanese traditions **do not tend to emphasize doctrines or strict religious affiliation**.

More information:

[Understanding Religion in Context](#)

(From *Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China*, by Asia for Educators Program at Columbia University)



Unknown artist, Lao Tzu, Shakyamuni, and Confucius. Hanging scroll ink and color. Date: Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Gift of Charles Lang Freer (F1916.109) © Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution

Chinese traditional worldview

Even if it is impossible to define one authentic and coherent “traditional Chinese worldview”, there were still **some basic principles concerning human existence and the functioning of the universe** that informed in various ways all the varieties of religious trends in traditional China.

Dao: It means “the Way” and probably is the most important concept in Chinese. It can refer often simultaneously to **theWay the Universe works**, but also to **the Way one should ‘exist’**, behave or even rule in society. It can be summarized as the right path for actively pursuing the ultimate goal in harmony with society and/or the cosmos.

Qi: the basic “stuff” of all that exists, **material and spiritual**. Its flow animates life and furnishes the functional power of events. **Qi** is also the root of the human body; its quality and movement determine human health.

Yin-Yang: Two opposite but complementary **principles that regulate the functioning of the cosmos**. As the **two aspects** of the **Dao**, their continuous alternation is at the origin of the rise and disappearance of all phenomena. The **Five Agents** (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water) add further nuances to the Yin Yang cosmology. These “agents” are to be seen much more like phases of a process of change, rather than mere "elements". As Yin constantly becomes Yang and vice versa, so Wood becomes Fire, that becomes Soil, that becomes Metal and so on.



The Chinese character for Dao 道, a pivotal concept not only for Daoism, but for the entirety of Chinese culture. It describes a path, road, or a way or method. Sometimes it means also "to say".

More information on the issue discussed above:

[The traditional Chinese worldview](#)

Early historical period

In the third millennium BC the first traces of **divination** techniques, such as pyromancy or the interpretation of signs of natural origin, are found in the culture of the Yellow River, the cradle of ancient Chinese civilization. These archaeological evidences attest the presence of cults linked to the cycle of the earth and agriculture, alongside those related to the world of spirits and ancestors. The Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) was based on the **worship of ancestors and god-kings**, and the utmost progenitor was **Shangdi**, whom specialists communicated with through divination. The Zhou dynasty (1046-221 BC), which overthrew

the Shang, emphasised a more **universal and impersonal idea of Tian** (heaven), a source of **moral order** and virtues. The crisis at the end of the Zhou dynasty triggered a **quest for new worldviews**, a context in which Confucian and Daoist traditions took their first steps.

The “Three Teachings”: Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism

When dealing with the subject of religion in China, it is wrong to put Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism on the same level. **Daoism** is linked to some elements of popular tradition and has developed magic-esoteric practices to prolong life or to achieve **immortality**. **Buddhism** is a religion of **salvation** and its clergy have developed a **monastic organization**. Unlike Buddhism, with its monasteries separated from society, the **Daoist** institutions tended to be **integrated in the villages**, organizing them around the community temple. Finally, **Confucianism**, was the **official state doctrine** and its officials were the so-called “literati”. The cohabitation of these three great traditions depended above all on the **level of tolerance of Confucian** officials: until Buddhism and Daoism did not question the state authority, Confucianism tolerated them and sometimes adopted them as state religions. However, whenever Daoism or Buddhism acquired too much power, constituting a political threat, they were subjected to violent persecutions. Frequent **rebellions**, whose ideology **was inspired by Daoism or Buddhism**, shook China in more than one occasion, failing to shake the bureaucratic state.

Confucianism

Confucianism is an ancient **textual tradition** born out of the teachings of Chinese thinker **Confucius** (Chin. *Kongzi*, 551- 479 BCE) who focuses on the philosophical, moral and political aspects of society. Because of the extremely strong influence it has had in East-Asia, Confucianism eventually became a sort of state religion in many countries on the same continent. Confucianism prescribed the ritual status of the Imperial house and provided a public and private ethical code. The Confucian texts became key to the **orthodox state ideology** of the Chinese dynasties, and although they were mastered only by a scholarly elite, they penetrated society deeply. Confucian teachings are primarily concerned with the **moral rules of conduct** that all persons must follow to create a **harmonious society**. However, Confucian secular ideas and practices involve a **larger sacred/cosmic/spiritual framework**: ideals of ritual and social hierarchy came to be elaborated inside the cosmic framework of Yin and Yang; and the worship of ancestors, of Confucius himself, and the Emperor were seen as the best way to enact moral virtues.

More information:

- [Daoism and the other religious traditions of China](#)
(par. "Relationship with other Chinese traditions: Confucianism", Source 2 and its analysis)
- [Confucius and the "Confucian Tradition"](#)
(From *Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China*, by Asia for Educators Program at Columbia University)

Daoism

Daoism, also spelled Taoism, is China's organized, indigenous religious system. Daoists take as their focus the **goal of attuning with the Dao**, but their **practices** and ideas have **hugely diversified** and evolved in Daoism's 2,000-year history and can be generally understood in terms of mediating between the energies of the body, the community and the cosmos. Daoists worship a complex hierarchy of sacred powers, which are emanations of the Dao or personal gods (allegedly former human beings who achieved union with the Dao and thus gained **Immortality**). Daoist religious specialists are **integrated into local society** and patronized by non-initiated lay people, and often implement **complex rituals** for the sake of their community.

More information:

- [Definition of Daoism](#)
- [The textual foundations of Daoism](#)
- [The ideal of Immortality and related practices](#)
- [The birth of organized Daoism](#)



A photo of a Daoist priest, taken in Wudang, a small mountain range in Hubei Province. The number of Daoists is difficult to estimate, due to a variety of factors including defining Daoism. For example, if people practicing Chinese popular religious practices, which have been influenced by Daoist tradition, are considered, the number of followers reaches 400 million. More balanced estimates for the number of Daoists worldwide range around 20 million.

Buddhism

Although there are reports of an earlier presence, it is said that the diffusion of Buddhism started in China during the late Han dynasty (206 BCE-221 CE), helped by certain **"similarities" with the Daoist traditions**. Both advocated similar meditative practices and **Nirvana** was understood as a kind of **Immortality**. In fact, the first **translations of Buddhist scriptures** utilized a Daoist vocabulary. Subsequent refined translations and new indigenous Buddhist scriptures eventually gave birth to the **Chinese Mahayana Canon**, a body of texts deemed canonical in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese Buddhism.

Indigenous **Chinese Buddhist schools were born**, like *Chan* (more known with its Japanese name, Zen). This flourishing of different schools can be explained by the Chinese approach to the sacred, that prefers multiple worldviews and religious viewpoints, but also, by Buddhism itself: in fact, the hermeneutic devices of the **Skillful Means** - the principle of adapting teachings and practices to the circumstances – stimulated **various interpretations of the main Buddhist principles**.

Buddhism was a powerful cultural and political force in China and, although it suffered a great persecution in 845, it greatly **contributed to the formation of the complex Chinese religious ethos** as much as the Confucian, Daoist and popular traditions.

More information:

- [Fact sheet on Buddhism](#)
- [Buddhism in China](#)

Chinese “popular religion”

To define Chinese religion primarily in terms of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism is to exclude ideas and practices that do not fit easily under any of the three labels. To simplify we can use the umbrella term "Popular Religion", which includes **aspects of religious life shared by most people, regardless of their affiliation**. This popular tradition is based on the worship or **propitiation of gods, ghosts, and ancestors**. In the past this was the cradle out of which indigenous traditions like **Confucianism and Daoism** sprouted, which in turn **deeply influenced** the popular religious consciousness with emphasis on moral conduct or the elaborated pantheon. Also **Buddhist ideas** like karmic retribution, rebirth and afterlife are deeply **ingrained**. Popular religious practices include, among many others, rites related to **care** of the spirit in the realm **of the dead**, the **New Year festival** as renewal of the cosmos, the ritual of **consulting a spirit medium** to solve problems such as sickness or other misfortunes.

More information:

- [Daoism and the other religious traditions of China](#)
(par. "Relationship with other Chinese traditions: Popular religion", Source 3 and its analysis)

- [Popular religion & Belief](#)

(From *Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China*, by Asia for Educators Program at Columbia University)

Religion in China after the Cultural Revolution

With the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) 2,000 years of Imperial rule came to an end. During decades of civil war, China became first a republic, and then a communist country.

The Republic of China (1911-1949) enacted **separation of state and religion** and **discriminated between religions** (with Christianity taken as example) and **superstitions** (i.e. popular religions) whose practice was prohibited. The People's Republic of China established in 1949 was officially atheist and maintained the same policy. Free adherence was granted **only to five officially recognized religions**: Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Confucianism was rejected due to its connection with the past Imperial regime. Indeed, religious traditions, taken as a whole as **symbols of old feudalism and foreign colonialism**, began here to be the **target of iconoclastic assaults** by anti-traditionalism movements. The **Cultural Revolution** movement (1966-1976) was characterized by a **harsh repression** of religions, and a massive number of places of worship were destroyed. After the death of Mao Zedong, this radical policy relaxed considerably, and **economic growth** and burgeoning urbanization fostered the **return to freer religious activities**, even if issues of state control and of national identity remain. The majority of the Chinese population today professes Buddhist or Daoist traditions. Other minorities are Christianity (3%) and Islam (1.5%). Buddhism today is more present in the cities and in the highest social classes while Chinese popular religion remains widespread at popular level, and it is developing in **new forms with new doctrines, rites and divinities**. Also **Confucian thought is regaining popularity** in both intellectual and popular classes.

More information:

- [Daoism and modern China](#)

- [20th Century: Communism & Internal Challenges to Tradition](#)

From *Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China*, by Asia for Educators Program at Columbia University

- [Religion in China Today: Reemergence of Traditional Practices and the Question of National Identity](#)

From *Living in the Chinese Cosmos: Understanding Religion in Late-Imperial China*, by Asia for Educators Program at Columbia University