

Stereotypes and Prejudices Related to Chinese Religions

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Introduction: the problem of the concept of 'religion'

Many of the stereotypes about Chinese religions derive from the fact that understanding Chinese religiosity through **comparisons with Western religious monotheistic culture is misleading**. That is, some concepts that Western culture takes for granted, but which are not at all true for the Chinese people, must be contextualized and clarified. For example, in the so-called "Religions of the Book" (Judaism, Christianity and Islam traditions), the idea of revelation is central: God has revealed himself in certain historical moments and in specific circumstances to men. Moreover, since God has revealed himself, the Truth is only one: the revealed One that is carefully codified.

In China, a similar idea of '**God**' **practically does not play any role** in relation to society and religion and is focused, instead, on other supernatural beings, like the spirits of the dead who have their own autonomous power. In China the souls of **ancestors** play a particularly important role and tablets representing them are object of **domestic worship**. Other practices entail the belief in various spiritual entities that, conversely, can be dangerous to humans and must be kept away.

Since the conception and the worship of powers independent from a single God have always been criticized by the 'official' traditions of European monotheisms (especially in post-Reformation times), modern **Westerners have often disregarded** such practices as "superstitious folk tricks", but this stereotype depends only on a **narrow, modern understanding of religion** that can fuel dangerous sentiments of cultural superiority.

More information on the European monotheistic concept of religion:

[Fact sheet on main stereotypes on the concept of religion](#)

[The Origins of Judaism](#)

(par. "The religion of the Hebrews and the birth of monotheism")

[Christianity: Creeds and dogma](#)

[Islam: From Sunnah to Sunnism](#)

(see Source 1: The *Shahada*, the formal confession of faith")

[Christianity: Relics and pilgrimage](#)

(Source 3: "The Treatise on Relics" by Calvin, as an example of virulent critics to 'superstitious devotion' from a Protestant perspective)

[Islam: The emergence of Islam in Arabia in the 7th century](#)

(Source 3: "Muhammad's entry into Mecca and the destruction of idols")

[Islam: The "visit" to the saints](#)

(Source 3: "The legality of the *Zyara*" on the condemnation of the practice of worshipping saints in Islam, which is nonetheless a widespread habit)

More information on Chinese Popular Religion:

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

(par. "Relationship with other Chinese traditions: Popular religion", Source 3 and its analysis).

[Funerals, memorials and the afterlife in China](#)

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

[Buddhist practice \(2\). Funerary rites, feasts, exorcisms](#)

(Source 2: "Spirits worship" that shows a Buddhist ceremony in China for the sake of ancestors).

The problem of the “Three Teachings” model

The doctrinal question of Chinese religion is another object of misunderstanding. The reference to the “Three Teachings” (Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism) may induce us to divide Chinese people into Confucians, Daoists and Buddhists (forgetting Christian and Muslim minorities). However, since the Western **notion of "belonging" to a religion hardly applies to China**, it is quite normal **to cut across traditions** and to follow doctrines and rituals of Confucianism, Daoism and/or Buddhism depending on the situation. It is also important to note that the Chinese tend to refer to the Confucian principles as so far as social relations (respect, moderation), Daoist principles as so far as their inner life (health practices, asceticism) and finally address Buddhism in old age, as it is considered more suitable for dealing with the problem of death and reincarnation. Moreover, the formula of the "Three Teachings" was coined by Chinese scholars and addressed to fellow educated elites, leaving out of the picture the richness of the so-called **Chinese Popular Religion**.

More information:

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

[Sanjiao, the Three Teachings](#)

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

Chinese Religions as “immutable wisdom”

As a counterpart to the denigrating interpretation as “superstitions”, Chinese religion has been object also of exotic and ultimately **fashionable stereotyping as a sort of “immutable wisdom”**, embodied in the figure of an old, calm and long-bearded sage with oriental eyes.

Particularly in the case of Daoism, texts like the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* are often associated to the so-called **“philosophical Daoism”**, **contrasted with** a later, corrupted and **superstitious “religious Daoism”**, like the **Way of Celestial Master**. But this is a modern **Western fiction**. In fact, the Chinese terms for “religion” and “philosophy” are an invention coined in the late 19th century. This false dualism reflects a colonialist and missionary

stereotype based on a one-sided reading of the long and complex history of China. First the Jesuits between the 16th and 17th century, **avored the textual modality of the Confucian tradition** to be transmitted and made known to Europe, because it was the tradition they deemed much more apt to dialogue with and to convert to Christianity. Then, the German philosopher Leibniz (1646-1716) saw in the imported Chinese classic texts a sort of unitary truth underlying all great religions and philosophies, while for the German philosopher Hegel (1770-1831), China's civilization was immobile and without history.

By the late 19th century, this **stereotypical paradigm** of "Philosophical Daoism" was thus consolidated; still today the *Daodejing* it is often translated and read as part of a kind of universal wisdom tradition or **alternative spirituality**. However, the importance of the **ritual, communal and bodily dimension cannot be downplayed in Daoism**.

More information:

[Definition of Daoism](#)

(esp. "Intercultural and interdisciplinary 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)

[The textual foundations of Daoism](#)

(esp. Source 1: "Excerpts from *Daodejing* and Source 2: "Excerpts from *Zhuangzi*", the relative analysis and "Intercultural and interdisciplinary information")

[The birth of organized Daoism](#)

(esp. in reference to the **Way of Celestial Master**)

[The ideal of Immortality and related practices](#)

(to see the various bodily and ritual practices of Daoism)

[Development of Daoist schools and practices](#)

(to see the historical development of Daoism)

Anarchic and ecologist stereotype

In America between the 1950s and 1970s the **Beat Generation and the New Age movement** looked at the ideas of "spontaneity" or "enlightenment" of Daoism and Buddhism (especially **Chan Buddhism**) as a way towards **individualistic and anarchic freedom**.

The ecologist dimension of the counterculture movement determined also an **"environment-friendly" stereotyped** view of Chinese religion because it seemed to preach **unity between Man and Nature**. It is true that in the Chinese view all things in the cosmos share, at their most fundamental level, a flow of cosmic energy (the **Qi**), but such attuning with the flow of universe is aimed to **bring benefit to the human society**, or to the

individual, not to protect the environment. In fact, nowadays China is facing serious **ecological problems**.

These interpretations are an appropriation and a profound modification the counterculture movement made in order to protest against the traditional and "repressive" Christian and capitalist system, that reveal, in reality, delusions, **desires and ideals projected on foreign traditions**.

More information:

[Buddhism in China](#)

(esp. Source 3 and its analysis, concerning **Chan Buddhism**)

[Buddhism and modernity](#)

(to understand these stereotypes in the wider context of modern transformation and adaptation of Buddhist traditions from all countries of Asia)

[The traditional Chinese worldview](#)

(to understand the concept of **Qi** energy in the context of traditional Chinese thought)

[Daoism and modern China](#)

(Source 2: "Great Ritual Offerings to the All-Embracing Heaven", to show how Daoist practices are far from being "anarchic" but include complex and well-coordinated rituals)

["Religion does not exist in China"](#)

Another prejudice concerning religions in China is their absence due to **the anti-religious ideology of the Chinese Communist Party**. Indeed, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) religious institutions were severely attacked. However, the approach of the Communist Party to religions was more one of **control and of "modernization"**, i.e. to limit "freedom of religion" to the sphere of private belief. Ironically, the figure of Mao himself has been and still is object of worshipping practices.

Contrary to this misconception there is a slow but **steady revival of religions** in China, aided also by **economic growth**. The idea of a fully secularized China is linked both to its recent communist history and – again - to an old Western prejudice: that modernization and economic growth always entail a diminished role of religion inside society. Incidentally, this is proving wrong also in Western countries.

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)

Conclusion

The two opposite stereotyped approaches to China - namely the negative view on Chinese religions as being superstitious or the positive admiration for a wise and/or an environmentalist tradition - tells more of our self-conception as Westerners: on one side we deem ourselves superior and don't want to give different religious traditions the status of "true" religion, on the other, deluded by our traditional values, we dream of an allegedly eternal Chinese wisdom.