

Chinese Religions

Joseph A. Adler

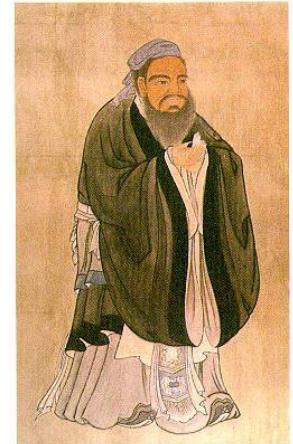
In Jonathan Fenby, ed., *The Seventy Wonders of China*
(London: Thames & Hudson, 2007)

One of the most remarkable things about Chinese religion is that certain patterns of thought and practice evident in the earliest known form – the divination and sacrificial rituals of the kings of the Shang dynasty (15th - 11th centuries BCE) – are still present today. The Shang kings made offerings to their ancestors in the hope that the ancestors would bestow blessings on the royal family and the state, and they practiced divination (by interpreting the cracks on heated animal bones) to determine the wishes of the ancestors and their satisfaction with the offerings. Many Chinese people today make ritual offerings at home altars to their ancestors and in temples to a wide variety of gods. And in the temples they practice newer forms of divination for basically the same reasons as the Shang kings. This ritual dyad of divination and sacrifice forms the core of what today is called "popular religion" or "folk religion." In popular religion gods, ghosts, and ancestors have been worshipped in a great variety of ways for three millennia. Although the natural life of popular religion was interrupted for the first few decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC, 1949-), it has thrived continuously in other Chinese communities such as Taiwan and Singapore, and in the PRC today it is undergoing an astonishing revival.

Chinese popular religion can be considered the fertile soil from which the text-based religions of Confucianism and Daoism have sprung. Buddhism, which was brought from India in the first century, joined those two as the "Three Religions" of traditional China. But these three always co-existed with popular religion, and all four were constantly influencing one another.

Confucius, or Master Kong (551-479 BCE), began a scholarly tradition with clear religious dimensions. Central to it is the concept and symbol of Heaven (*tian*), which is the ultimate reality and the source of moral values. Ancestor worship was incorporated into the Confucian tradition, as well as the worship of Sages, such as Confucius and his later follower Mencius (Mengzi). Central to Confucian thought is the claim that moral inclinations are essential to human nature, and that only through the nourishment of family life, education, and benevolent government can those inclinations fully develop. Confucianism has therefore always been closely associated with the family, with education (Confucius is the "patron saint" of teachers), and with public service.

In the second century BCE Confucianism was adopted by the Han dynasty as the official ideology of government; but this eventually led to an increasingly conservative, politicized application of its essentially religious humanism. After the 19th century, when China was brought to its knees by European colonial domination (the Opium Wars of the 1840s) and a devastating rebellion led by a convert to Christianity (the Taiping Rebellion), Confucianism became the whipping boy for all that was wrong with the imperial system. This reached its peak in the Communist PRC during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. But since 1980 there has been a nearly complete reversal of the negative evaluation of Confucianism among Chinese intellectuals and government officials. The virtual death of Marxist-Maoist thought in the PRC and the enormous growth in the economic sphere have resulted in a perceived moral vacuum, which Confucian values are beginning to fill. Meanwhile, Confucianism has continued to define the worldviews of many Chinese intellectuals outside the PRC, and its religious humanism has appealed to many Westerners. So the future of Confucianism both within and outside of China deserves attention.



Kong Qiu, better known in China as Kongzi (Master Kong) and in the West as Confucius, is revered as the first sage of the Confucian tradition. His birthday, celebrated on September 28, is "Teachers Day" in Taiwan.

Daoism in some respects can be considered the *yin* (dark, receptive, yielding) to Confucianism's *yang* (light, creative, active) in Chinese culture. The earliest form of Daoism was not a full-fledged religion but merely an intellectual current, stemming largely from two classic texts: the *Laozi* or *Daodejing* (attributed to a mythical 6th century BCE figure named Laozi, or "Old Master"), and the *Zhuangzi* (written by the 4th century BCE philosopher Zhuang Zhou, or Master Zhuang). The *Daodejing* (Scripture of the Way and its Power), one of the most frequently-translated pieces in world religions, is a short text addressed primarily to the ruler of a state. It was compiled from anonymous sources in the third century BCE, near the end of a five hundred-year period of political disunity and warfare, and it proposes a philosophy of statecraft and personal cultivation based on "non-action" (*wuwei*). By "non-action" is meant avoidance of deliberate, goal-directed action in favor of spontaneous action that is in accord with natural patterns of change. The foundation of these patterns of change is the Dao (Way or Path), which in the *Laozi* is the ineffable origin of all phenomena and the path to be



The mythical Daoist sage, Laozi, is said to have left society through the Jade Gate in Western China, never to be seen again. The gatekeeper asked him to leave behind a record of his wisdom, so Laozi jotted down the *Daodejing* and left it with him.

followed to achieve harmony with the natural world. The *Zhuangzi* stresses that all ordinary knowledge is limited by our particular perspectives, preventing us from understanding the Dao because the Dao is the universal process of change and transformation. But by practicing certain forms of meditation we can transcend our perspectival limitations and attune ourselves to the Dao.

In the second century CE a new form of Daoism emerged, based on a series of revelations from Laozi to a man named Zhang Daoling (Laozi by this time was conceived as a god). This was the beginning of Daoism as a full-fledged religion, with a community of believers, a large pantheon of deities, a priesthood, and several complex systems of rituals and meditation. Today there are two major sects of Daoism in China, one with a largely hereditary priesthood and another with a monastic system for training priests.

Buddhism, which originated in India in the fifth century BCE, entered China in the first century CE and over the course of several hundred years was transformed from a foreign religion to a distinctly Chinese tradition. Buddhism from the beginning was a monastic tradition, which struck many Chinese as disrespectful to one's parents and anti-social, since the family was the basis of Chinese society. But the teachings of Buddhism were new and profound, so it eventually attracted large numbers of followers – especially women, who could become nuns. (Women's options in traditional Chinese society were primarily limited to the roles of wives and mothers.) Several new schools of Buddhism emerged in China, including Chan (or Zen in Japanese), reflecting influences of both Confucianism and Daoism.

Buddhism brought with it certain beliefs that were common assumptions in India but new to China. One is the eternal cycle of rebirth, or *samsara*. Another is the idea of *karma*, or "moral causality," which means that every intentional deed has an effect that will occur later, either in this life or the next. This is the force, so to speak, that keeps us trapped in the cycle of rebirth. In addition to these, Buddhist thought is based on the premise that everything that exists is impermanent, and that nothing is what it is independently of multiple causal factors; nothing has "own-being," or independent, autonomous being. Human beings naturally assume that we each have an independent, autonomous "self" or "soul," which remains constant as our outward attributes change. But the Buddha ("enlightened one") said that this is a mistake, and that we too are simply complex, ever-changing,

psycho-physical systems. Moreover, he said, the habit of thinking in terms of an independent, permanent "self" leads us to crave things, and all desires are ultimately frustrated because nothing is permanent. Therefore, by eliminating the false notion of "self" – or by understanding that concept to be merely a conventional designation for the impermanent, dynamic "system" that we really are – we can eliminate all craving and the frustration or dissatisfaction (*duhkha*, or "suffering") that results from it. This, he said, is the key to a satisfying life and the way to break the karmic cycle of rebirth.



Guanyin, the Chinese name of the Indian *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara, is the most popular "divinity" in East Asia. A *bodhisattva* is actually not a god or goddess, but an enlightened being who, instead of attaining *nirvana*, remains in the world to help others.

Chinese Buddhism retained this core of Buddhist thought. But while Indian Buddhism had understood the ultimate goal of human life as *nirvana*, or "extinguishing" the karmic cycle, Chinese Buddhists tended to speak more in terms of "enlightenment" as a transformed state of wisdom and compassion that would, in turn, positively transform society. Thus the social emphasis of Confucianism and the Daoist affirmation of the natural world were incorporated into Chinese Buddhist thought.

The religions of China have rarely been at odds with each other. The Chinese people have always been free to mix and match their beliefs and practices, although some, of course, have identified more or less exclusively with one or another. The relative harmony of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Chinese popular religion throughout history reflects the ideal of harmony between the natural, social, and spiritual worlds that each tradition, in its own way, strives to realize.

Bibliography

- Joseph A. Adler, *Chinese Religious Traditions*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed. *Religions of China in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.