

Excerpt from
"Chinese Religion: An Overview"
Joseph A. Adler
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The study of Chinese religion presents both problems and opportunities for the general theory of religion. It is therefore instructive, before embarking on a historical survey, to outline a theoretical approach that will accommodate the wide variety of beliefs and practices that have traditionally been studied under the rubric of religion in China.

One indicator of the problematic nature of the category "religion" in Chinese history is the absence of any pre-modern word that is unambiguously associated with the category. The modern Chinese word *zongjiao* was first employed to mean "religion" by late 19th-century Japanese translators of European texts. *Zongjiao* 宗教 (or *shūkyō* in Japanese) is a compound consisting of *zong* (*shū*), which is derived from a pictogram of an ancestral altar and most commonly denotes a "sect," and *jiao* (*kyō*), meaning "teaching." (The compound had originally been a Chinese Buddhist term meaning simply the teachings of a particular sect.)

Zongjiao/shūkyō thus carries the connotation of "ancestral" or sectarian teachings. The primary reference of this newly-coined usage for *shūkyō* in the European texts being translated was, of course, Christianity. And since Christianity does in fact demand exclusive allegiance and does emphasize doctrinal orthodoxy (as in the various credos), *zongjiao/shūkyō* is an apt translation for the concept of religion that takes Christianity as its standard or model.

Part of the problem arising from this situation is that Chinese (and Japanese) religions in general do not place as much emphasis as Christianity does on exclusivity and doctrine. And so Chinese, when asked to identify what counts as *zongjiao* in their culture, are often reluctant to include phenomena that Westerners would be willing to count as religion, because the word "religion" -- while notoriously difficult to define -- does not carry the same connotations as *zongjiao*.

Before the adoption of *zongjiao*, *jiao* itself ("teaching") came closest, in usage, to the meaning of "religion." Since at least the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the standard rubric for discussing the religions of China was *san jiao* 三教, or the "three teachings," referring to Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Yet this is problematic too, as it excludes what today is usually called "popular religion" (or "folk religion"), which throughout Chinese history has

probably accounted for more religious behavior than the “three teachings” combined. This exclusion is more than a matter of usage: *jiao* does not apply well to popular religion because popular religion is strongly oriented toward religious action or practice; it has very little doctrine and, apart from independent sects, no institutionally-recognized canonical texts in which doctrines would be presented.

Although constituting a standard chapter in modern Western surveys of Chinese religion, Confucianism is very often described as something other than a religion in the strict (yet poorly defined) sense. There was a time in Western scholarship when Buddhism was occasionally described in similar fashion, although outside the most conservative theological frameworks that is no longer the case. But the status of Confucianism, even in academic circles focused on Chinese religion, is still disputed.

The problematic nature of Confucianism vis-à-vis religion is the most compelling reason to suggest at the outset a conceptual framework in which all the varieties of Chinese religion can be understood. In effect this is a “definition” of religion, although it should not be considered an exclusive definition. It is, instead, one way of conceptualizing religion that is well-suited to its subject -- i.e. that makes particularly good sense of *Chinese* religion -- and that sheds light not only on the non-controversial forms of Chinese religion but also on those forms that might be excluded by some definitions. But it should be acknowledged that, since religion is a multi-dimensional set of complex human phenomena, no single definition (short of a laundry list of common characteristics) should be expected to capture its essence. Indeed, perhaps religion has no essence.

The concept of religion that will be presumed here is that *religion is a means of ultimate transformation and/or ultimate orientation*. This is an elaboration of a definition proposed by the Buddhologist Frederick Streng, who suggested that religion is “a means to ultimate transformation” (Streng, p. 2). “Ultimate transformation” implies (1) a given human condition that is in some way flawed, unsatisfactory, or caught in a dilemma; (2) a goal that posits a resolution of that problem or dilemma; and (3) a process leading toward the achievement of the goal. This formula is well-suited to Chinese religions because the concept of transformation (*hua*) is in fact a highly significant element in Confucian, Daoist, and Chinese Buddhist thought and practice. The qualifier “ultimate” means that the starting point, process, and goal are defined in

relation to whatever the tradition in question believes to be absolute or unconditioned. "Ultimate orientation" introduces an aspect of Mircea Eliade's theory of sacred space and sacred time: spatial orientation to an *axis mundi* or "sacred pole," a symbolic connection between heaven and earth; or temporal orientation marked in reference to periods of sacred ritual time, such as annual festivals. This addition to Streng's definition accounts for certain popular practices that are not conceived in terms of ultimate transformation. Much of the contemporary practice of Chinese popular religion -- such as worship and sacrifice for such mundane ends as success in school or business -- can be explained in terms of ultimate orientation. And Confucianism, the most problematic strand of Chinese religion, can clearly be seen as a "means of ultimate transformation" toward the religious goal of "sagehood" (*sheng* 聖), a term whose religious connotations are suggested, for example, by the use of the same word to translate the Jewish and Christian "Holy Scriptures" (*shengjing* 聖經).