

Theistic and Non-theistic Belief in China

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Chinese religions have a continuous 3500-year recorded history in which both theistic and non-theistic elements have played central roles. Tonight I would like to briefly discuss Confucianism, Daoism, Chinese Buddhism, and popular religion in light of their theistic and non-theistic strands. I will argue that non-theistic naturalism and humanism figure more prominently in the history of Chinese religion than in the west, although never to the exclusion of theistic belief. I will also recommend a theory that I think is extremely helpful in understanding Chinese religious thought: David Hall and Roger Ames' theory of two kinds of "order:" logical order and aesthetic order.

I usually find it helpful to begin at the beginning – in this case, the beginning of documented Chinese history, which happens also to be the earliest known form of Chinese religion. This was the religion of the earliest state-level dynasty, the Shang (roughly 15th to mid-11th century BCE). It was heavily ritualistic, centering on sacrifices made by the kings to their ancestors and oracle-bone, pyromantic divinations to determine the will of the ancestors and the will of the single high god whom they served, Di (Lord, or Shangdi, High Lord).¹ This ritual dyad of sacrifice and divination symbolized and enacted a belief that became central to both Confucianism and Daoism: the belief in an inherent, ontological connection between the human realm and the realm of gods and ancestors, called "heaven" (*tian*). So even though this system appears to be essentially theistic, it is based on a non-dualistic ontology in which human nature and divine nature are not fundamentally different.

¹ The Shang of Shangdi is unrelated to the name of the dynasty. For a thorough scholarly study by the leading American historian of the Shang see David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

Daoism

The earliest strand of naturalism is found in the Daoist classics, *Laozi* (aka *Daodejing*) and *Zhuangzi*. The *Laozi*, which was compiled into roughly its present form in the 3rd century BCE, is a collection of sayings attributed to an anonymous "Old Master," which is what the word *Laozi* literally means (it is not a name). This Old Master was said to have been an older contemporary of Confucius (Kongzi, or Master Kong), who lived in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE (551-479). However, there is no information about who "Laozi" might actually have been, or even whether there was such an individual, for "Laozi" can also mean "Old Masters," and the book in fact is clearly the product of multiple voices. The other major Daoist classic, *Zhuangzi* (Master Zhuang), is named for its main author, Zhuang Zhou, an actual person who lived in the 4th century BCE. Both of these texts focus on an impersonal absolute reality called the *Dao*, which means "Way" or "Path." The *Dao* in these texts is the "Way of nature," the ineffable origin of all phenomena and the path to be followed to achieve harmony with the natural world. Nature acts spontaneously, without preconceived purpose, but its actions follow patterns that can be understood. By understanding this *dao* and emulating nature one can lead a long and fulfilled life with minimal stress.

Classical Daoism was an intellectual current, not a religion. However, its alleged founder, Laozi, over the course of several centuries became a god. (In Chinese popular religion many gods are former human beings.) In the 2nd century CE this deity, now called Taishang Laojun (Lord Lao the Most High), was the source of a set of revelations to a man named Zhang Daoling, who founded the religion of Daoism. From the end of the Han dynasty through the Song dynasty (960-1279) a huge new pantheon of deities came into being, whom Daoists consider to occupy higher heavens than those of the popular pantheon. But those deities also exist, in potential form, within the human body. They represent the energetic potential of *qi* to be purified or transformed into *shen*, or spirit. *Qi* is the "psycho-physical stuff" that all existing things (including mind, spirits, and gods) are composed of; it is characterized by two complementary functional modes: *yin* (dark, moist, condensing, sinking) and *yang* (light, dry, expanding, rising). The ultimate purpose of Daoist methods of self-cultivation is to transform the *qi* of one's own body into the deities that constitute the "body of the *Dao*." Thus deity does not represent a mode of being fundamentally

distinct from humanity. Matter, energy, and spirit are points along a single continuum.

Classical Confucianism

Dao was never unique to Daoism; it was equally important in Confucianism, although interpreted somewhat differently. While the Daoist *dao* was the way or pattern of nature, *dao* for the early Confucians was the ideal social-political-ethical order. The Daoist *dao* was always perfectly realized in nature; only humans were alienated from it. For Confucians, the *dao* depended on humans to be put into effect. Confucius said, for example, "If the Way prevailed in the world I would not be trying to change things."² Humans could make the Way prevail by learning certain virtues and putting them into effect in their own lives and in society. Chief among these were the virtues of humanity or humaneness (*ren*), rightness or behavior appropriate to circumstances (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), and wisdom, the knowledge of good and evil (*zhi*). These virtues, at least in potential form, were "given by Heaven (*tian*)," and the ideal person who fully perfected them was a "sage" (*shengren*).³

The importance of the terms "Heaven" and "sagehood" in the Confucian tradition, from the earliest times to the present, is one of the reasons (not the only one) for calling Confucianism a religious tradition. "Heaven" has a range of meanings, from purely naturalistic to semi-personalistic. It is "the heavens," including the sky and the realm of the heavenly bodies (sun, moon, planets, stars). It is also the realm of the gods and ancestors. And finally it is the locus of a moral will known as the "mandate of Heaven" (*tian ming*). The original meaning of this term is a doctrine of religio-political legitimation formulated perhaps in the 11th century BCE by the founders of the Zhou dynasty (c. 1145-256 BCE). According to this doctrine, the authority to rule is "given" to a particular royal family by Heaven based on the family's virtue. When that dynasty's virtue dissipates and declines, as it inevitably will, Heaven "takes away" their mandate to rule and awards it to another family. This is, therefore, a theory of dynastic change. It also

² Trans. Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Macmillan, 1939).

³ For the sake of brevity I am glossing over the details and omitting the textual evidence here. I am thinking mainly of the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) of Confucius and the *Mencius* (*Mengzi*). Mencius, or Master Meng (Mengzi), lived in the 4th century BCE, about 150 years after Confucius.

implies that Heaven recognizes and responds to human virtue. Confucius, for example, says "When you have offended against Heaven there is nowhere you can turn to in your prayers" (*Analects* 3:13), and "If I have done anything improper, may Heaven's curse be on me, may Heaven's curse be on me!" (*Analects* 6:28).

Yet Heaven retained a naturalistic meaning. For example, the first line of the *Zhongyong* (Centrality and Commonality), part of the early Confucian canon, says, "What Heaven decrees (or "what is given by Heaven") is human nature."⁴ But this is interpreted to mean precisely what Mencius meant when he said that human nature is innately good, i.e. that human goodness is natural.⁵ Likewise, Mencius (the next great sage in the Confucian tradition) interprets the Mandate of Heaven as a way of speaking about the natural attraction of the people to a particular ruler, based on his virtue. Quoting the *Shujing* (Scripture of Documents), another canonical text, Mencius says, "Heaven does not speak.... Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear."⁶ So Mencius seems to lean towards the naturalistic end of Heaven's spectrum of meaning.

Nevertheless, Confucians understand Heaven to be the absolute reality, the ultimate moral authority, and the source of the creativity inherent in the natural world. Heaven is the explanation for whatever is beyond human control, for example events that we might attribute either to chance or to necessity, such as the family one is born into or the fact that we must all die. Heaven is also the source of human virtue, and is therefore immanent (in humans); Confucius said, "Heaven produced the virtue (*de*) in me."⁷ But that virtue is the creative power that enables humans to transcend their given conditions and become sages. Heaven is therefore both

⁴ See Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and comp., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 98.

⁵ E.g. Mencius 2A.6, 6A.6, 6A.8. The *Zhongyong* is attributed Mencius' teacher and Confucius' grandson, Zisi. Although this cannot be confirmed, there is no doubt that the two texts reflect the same school of thought.

⁶ *Mencius* 5A.5.

⁷ *Analects* 7:22 or 23, depending on the edition.

immanent and transcendent.⁸ In many respects Heaven is a functional equivalent of the Biblical god. But it does not speak to people, it is not a personal god, and it did not create the world as a whole. Creativity, in traditional Chinese thought, is inherent in the world, not extrinsic to it.⁹

The word "sagehood" (*sheng*) has clear religious connotations in Chinese. For Confucius the sages were semi-divine beings who are completely beyond the capability of human beings to match. For him, the ultimate goal of moral self-transformation is to become humane (*ren*). Beginning with Mencius, though, sagehood is redefined as humaneness, making the attainment of sagehood a theoretical possibility for any human being (*Mencius* 6A.7). Yet it still retains an aura of sacredness. For example, the word for a sage, *shengren*, was later used for the Christian "saint." And the Christian Bible in Chinese is called *Sheng jing*, Holy Scripture. (That word *jing* or "scripture," incidentally, is the same word used for the Confucian canonical books, usually and misleadingly called "classics." It was also the word chosen to translate *sūtra* when Buddhism entered China.)

The third great classical Confucian scholar, Xunzi or Master Xun (3rd century BCE), took the naturalistic strain in Confucianism even further by denying any transcendent meaning to Heaven. For him, *tian* simply means the natural world. He devotes an entire chapter of his book (*Xunzi*) to debunking the idea that Heaven is a willful entity. Xunzi argues forcefully, for example, against the common belief in portents and omens, such as the appearance of comets as meaningful symbols of Heaven's pleasure or displeasure with the ruling power. He says that these are simply natural occurrences with no particular human relevance.

In making these arguments Xunzi is actually developing an important theme that goes back to Confucius himself: the effort to redirect attention from the formal ritualism of court sacrifice and divination to the human socio-ethical-political sphere, which is the arena in which the Way can be put into effect. This is Confucian humanism. Confucius had said, for instance, "Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep them at a distance" (*Analects* 6:22). Thus he believed in the

⁸ See Shu-hsien Liu, "The Confucian Approach to the Problem of Transcendence and Immanence," *Philosophy East & West*, 22, no. 1 (1972): 45-52.

⁹ See Joseph A. Adler, "'The Great Virtue of Heaven and Earth: Deep Ecology in the *Yijing*,'" <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Writings/Deep%20Ecology%20in%20Yijing.pdf>.

existence of ghosts and spirits, but did not believe that placating them should be one's main concern. Xunzi is likewise saying that humans should devote their energy to the socio-ethical realm, and should realize that human flourishing depends entirely on ourselves. We ultimately control our own destinies, and we must accept that responsibility; we must not fool ourselves into thinking that Heaven can intervene to help us or that Heaven is willfully responsible for our troubles.

Xunzi also had a very interesting, humanistic theory of ritual. He said that formal rituals, especially those practiced in ordinary life, such as marriage, funerals, and ancestral sacrifice, were devised by the great sages of the past in order to embellish or adorn human life by giving us structures through which we can fully develop and express our natural emotions. Such feelings as joy, grief, and reverence are distinctly human characteristics, and so to fully realize them is to be fully human. Ritual is a means of bringing into existence a fully human world from the raw material of our emotions; it is a means of satisfying certain psychological needs and desires without encroaching on those of others. Only the ancient sages could have achieved this delicate balance, so it is necessary to learn their Ways, which are recorded in the "classics" (scriptures). Funerals and memorial services for ancestors, for example, are means of ensuring that the natural feelings of grief and loss have the opportunity to be expressed, because if they are repressed they can produce unwanted psychological effects. While uneducated people may think of these rituals as placating the spirits of the departed, the cultured person understands that their efficacy lies solely within the human realm.¹⁰ Xunzi's theory of repression clearly anticipates Sigmund Freud by over two millennia; in this and other respects he sounds rather like an Enlightenment thinker to our ears.

Popular religion

Thus by the time that Buddhism entered China in the 1st century and the Daoist religion arose in the 2nd century, there was a well-established tradition of naturalistic and humanistic thought. On the whole, though, polytheism thoroughly pervaded Chinese life, especially among

¹⁰ Burton Watson, trans., *Hsün Tzu: Basic Writings* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1963), 109-110.

non-educated commoners. Their beliefs were closely tied to the agricultural cycle and to the forces that influenced it. In contrast to the more abstract Heaven, these forces took the form of an astonishing variety of gods, ghosts or demons, and spirits. Many of these were troublesome, while others were more neutral or benign, such as the gods of particular mountains, rivers, and seas, and earth gods (*tu shen*) of other specific localities. The High Lord (Shangdi) of the Shang dynasty survived under several different names, but for the most part was not worshipped by ordinary people.¹¹ It is important to note, however, that the worldviews of the elite and the commoners were not radically distinct. The panoply of spiritual beings was known to all, and to the extent that members of the elite had family roots in the agricultural tradition, they too engaged in the ritual forms of propitiation of and communication with the various gods, ghosts, and spirits. The religious worldview was a continuous whole, in which differences in emphasis corresponded to differences in the immediate concerns and interests of its participants.

With the possible exception of the high god, none of these spiritual beings was immortal. Nor were they concerned with human virtue: like the ancestors of the Shang kings, the deities worshipped by commoners responded to sacrifices as an exchange of favors (*do ut des*, "I give so that you give"). Sacrifice and divination, and when gods became troublesome, exorcism, were the usual forms of interaction between humans and gods. These rituals performed by commoners, as one might expect, were primarily directed toward the personal welfare of individuals and families, unlike the predominant concerns among the elite for affairs of state.

Human interactions with gods involved mutual obligations. Humans were obliged to worship them and to sustain them with sacrificial offerings (usually food). But that obliged the gods to do what they could to benefit human life, e.g. by providing timely rain and sun for crops, or producing sons, or not causing illness. If worship and sacrifice were deemed sufficient yet misfortune continued to occur, people were entitled to turn to different gods (a distinct advantage of polytheism). The relations between humans and gods were governed by the same principles – especially mutual obligation – that governed human society. Thus we can see even in Chinese popular religion a characteristic that continues to be prominent to this day: the absence of a sharp

¹¹ See Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

disjuncture between the spiritual and mundane worlds. As the oft-quoted saying has it, "Heaven and humanity are one" (*tian ren heyi*).¹²

Buddhism

Buddhism, simultaneously with Daoism, greatly enriched the religious landscape of China. After being brought to China by monks from India and Central Asia in the 1st century, Buddhism slowly spread and underwent a process of "sinicization." This involved the development of several new schools that incorporated distinctly Chinese characteristics – Huayan, Tiantai, Chan (Zen), and Pure Land – between the 5th and 8th centuries.

These new schools arose within the Mahayana ("Greater Vehicle") branch of Buddhism. For our purposes here, the most salient difference between Mahayana and earlier, South Asian forms of Buddhism (Hinayana or Theravada) is the multiplicity of buddhas and bodhisattvas in Mahayana, which for all intents and purposes on the popular level joined the pantheon of Chinese deities. On the level of Buddhist theory, however, there are important distinctions. First, buddhas and bodhisattvas are not gods.¹³ Gods occupy the highest rung of the ladder of *samsāra*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This means that humans can be reborn as gods, and that gods are not immortal. Gods exist, and they can help people with mundane ends, but they cannot help people achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirth because they themselves are still trapped in it.¹⁴ Second, the most fundamental philosophical principle in Buddhism is the concept of "no-self" (*anātman*), which means that a person has no unchanging essence, no fixed substance of

¹² The saying originated with the Neo-Confucian Zhang Zai (1020-1077), in his *Zheng meng* (Correcting Youthful Ignorance), section 17.

¹³ The third branch of Buddhism, the Vajrayana or Diamond Vehicle, developed in Tibet. Although its philosophy is basically the same as Mahayana, in terms of ritual and spiritual practice it is quite distinct. Vajrayana treats buddhas and bodhisattvas more explicitly as deities, and so has a much more developed theistic dimension in the stricter sense.

¹⁴ A buddha, like the historical Buddha of our cosmic age, Sakyamuni Buddha (5th century BCE), is a person who has entirely left the realm of rebirth. A bodhisattva, such as the bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin, is a person who has achieved enlightenment but vows to remain in the samsaric cycle in order to help other sentient beings achieve enlightenment. The bodhisattva is thus characterized by *wisdom* (enlightenment) and *compassion* (the vow to help other sentient beings).

which all observable characteristics are attributes. Mahayana Buddhism extends this concept to all things: all things are "empty" of independent, autonomous essence. Or to put it another way, all things are fundamentally *impermanent* and *interdependent*. Furthermore, this interdependence is not simply mutual influence or relationship; all things are contingent for their very being on all other things.

One effect of the doctrine of no-self or emptiness, on the philosophical level, is to undermine the validity of the *personalization* that is inherent in theism. In Buddhist theory the concept of a personal deity, like the concept of an autonomous self, is merely a conventional designation for a temporary, ever-changing local sub-system of the universal web of causation.¹⁵ This, in addition to the irrelevance of deities to Buddhist soteriology, makes both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism basically non-theistic traditions. (I use "non-theistic" instead of "atheistic" to suggest the fact that the provisional existence of gods is not denied, but they play no role in the scheme of salvation. And I should add that in Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhism, the line between deities and buddhas/bodhisattvas is virtually erased.) Where this non-theistic character is most evident is in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and in the religious practice of monastics and more educated laypeople. In a Chan (Zen) monastery, for example, there will be iconic imagery of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and monastics will bow and make symbolic offerings to them. But when asked who or what they are worshipping, they will say something to the effect that the imagery is symbolic of the potential for Buddhahood – the innate wisdom and compassion or "Buddha-nature" – in every sentient being. Less educated commoners, on the other hand, will most likely be completely unaware of the doctrines of no-self and emptiness. For them, the buddhas and bodhisattvas are basically deities, although perhaps on a higher, more universal level than the other deities they worship.

Neo-Confucianism

Buddhism and Daoism dominated the religious and intellectual worldviews of China between the fall of the Han dynasty in the early 3rd century CE and the beginning of the Song in

¹⁵ This is obviously a theory that requires much more explanation than I will provide here. See any introductory text on Buddhism, or my *Chinese Religious Traditions*, chapter 4.

the late 10th. A strong revival of Confucianism, known in the West as "Neo-Confucianism," began in the 11th century and dominated Chinese intellectual life until the 20th.¹⁶ Neo-Confucianism is in part a synthesis of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, although the Confucian core is distinctly dominant. The Daoist strand is mainly the Neo-Confucian cosmology based on *qi* ("psycho-physical stuff"), while the Buddhist element is most evident in the Neo-Confucian theories of mind and mental cultivation, including the practice of meditation. Tonight I will focus on Neo-Confucian attitudes towards gods, ghosts, and ancestors, the three general types of spiritual beings in Chinese religion.

The seeds of Neo-Confucian cosmology were planted in the early Han dynasty, primarily by Dong Zhongshu (2nd century BCE), a high official who persuaded Emperor Wu of the Han (r. 140-87 BCE) to switch from Daoism to Confucianism as the officially-sanctioned ideology of government.¹⁷ Dong integrated the natural philosophy of *qi* into Confucian thought, constructing a cosmological anthropology in which the human body is a microcosm of the state and of the universe. This idea would also become central to the Daoist view of the human body and its place in the cosmos. The salient point in regard to Neo-Confucianism is that early (classical) Confucianism, which hitherto had no cosmology to speak of, now incorporated the vocabulary of *yin-yang qi* with which to develop a cosmological or naturalistic basis for its moral psychology.¹⁸

Neo-Confucianism began in the 11th century among *literati* (intellectuals) who were concerned to revive and strengthen Confucianism as an alternative to Buddhism. Buddhism had been attracting many of the creative thinkers in China for several hundred years and was

¹⁶ The term "Neo-Confucianism" is problematic, not only because it is not an indigenous terms, but also because there is little agreement among specialists on what its boundaries are. However, I will use it here for the sake of simplicity. The more accurate term for the group of Confucians I will be discussing is the "Cheng-Zhu school," referring to Cheng Yi (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200). The term they used for themselves is *Daoxue*, or "Learning of the Way."

¹⁷ See de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, 292-310.

¹⁸ Mencius had made some use of the concept of *qi* (*Mencius* 2A.2), but not in a systematic way. He did, however, emphasize the idea that *qi* has a moral dimension, which is an important point, one that challenges the traditional Western separation (since Hume) of fact and value.

especially popular in the Song.¹⁹ Many of the early Neo-Confucians believed that Buddhism was a threat to Chinese civilization, as it encouraged people to leave their families and join monasteries and nunneries. They felt that Chinese society and Chinese values were based on the family, and that Buddhism – which after all was not an indigenous Chinese tradition – threatened to weaken the social and moral fabric.²⁰ The conquest of the northern half of Song China in 1127 by the Jurchen, a non-Chinese nomadic culture from the northeast, reinforced the idea that China needed to return to its indigenous cultural roots in order to strengthen itself and regain its lost territory.²¹

By the 12th century, after the conquest of north China, some of the new Confucian theories that had arisen in the 11th century were forged into a synthesis by Zhu Xi (1130-1200), who is known as the architect or "great synthesizer" of the Neo-Confucian religio-philosophical system that dominated Chinese intellectual life until the 20th century. The extremely prolific Zhu Xi constructed not only a system of philosophical thought and religious practice but also a complete educational curriculum extending from what we could call primary school to the graduate level. His philosophical system, which incorporated cosmology, metaphysics, psychology, ethics, anthropology, history, literature, and government, included a naturalistic theory of gods, ghosts, and ancestors, to which we now turn.

As mentioned earlier, *qi*, or psycho-physical stuff, is the substance of which all existing phenomena are constituted, including all the phases of matter, energy, mind, and even the various forms of spirit (*shen*). It is convenient, although over-simplified, to think of *qi* as a fundamental vapor that can condense into solid matter and disperse into finer and finer forms. It is something like the *aer* of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Anaximenes, who claimed that *aer* (like *qi*)

¹⁹ See Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr., eds., *Buddhism in the Sung* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), and John R. Mcrae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

²⁰ For a famous example of anti-Buddhist rhetoric see Han Yu's "Memorial on the Bone of the Buddha," in de Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1, 583-585.

²¹ The Jurchen themselves were conquered by the Mongols in 1234, and the Mongols conquered the remaining Song territory in the south in 1279, on their way to assembling the large contiguous land empire in human history (as far west as the Danube). The Chinese eventually drove out the Mongols in 1368.

was the fundamental substance or nature (*physis*) of all things.²² *Yin* and *yang*, whose root meanings are "shady" and "sunny" (or dark and light), are not substances or things but rather functional modes of *qi*. *Yin* is *qi* in its dense, dark, sinking, wet, condensing mode; *yang* denotes the light, bright, rising, dry, expanding mode. Together *yin* and *yang* represent the principle of bipolarity or complementarity, which was almost universally considered in China since the Han dynasty to be the most fundamental ordering principle of the cosmos – in Neo-Confucian terms, the most fundamental, universal *li* (principle, pattern, or order).

Li and *qi* are the fundamental terms in Zhu Xi's philosophical system. *Li* is the inherent orderliness of all *qi*. But unlike the modern scientific notion of natural law (descriptive but not prescriptive), *li* has both descriptive and normative aspects; it is both the natural order and the moral order. In Zhu Xi's terms, *li* is both "the principle by which [things] are as they are" (*suo yiran zhi li*) and "the principle of [things] as they must be" (*suo dangran zhi li*).²³ This non-dualism of fact and value in Confucianism goes back to the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which implies that the natural world (the naturalistic aspect of Heaven) responds to human virtue, and it was reinforced by Mencius' claim that morality is natural to human beings.²⁴

Neo-Confucian ideas about theism are expressed in terms of their theories on "ghosts and spirits," or *gui-shen*. Ghosts (*gui*) are unfriendly, dangerous spirits of the dead, especially those who died in unnatural or otherwise extraordinary ways; those for whom the proper burial rites were not performed; and those whose descendants have neglected them, leaving them with no proper place in the social order, which includes both the living and the dead. Spirits (*shen*) are those whose deaths were natural and properly observed, and whose descendants honor them properly with sacrificial offerings. In other words, these spirits are ancestors (*zu*, or *zuxian*).

But the word *shen* – in the Song dynasty as well as the present day – also refers to gods,

²² See G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 143-162.

²³ See Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Edmund Ryden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 346.

²⁴ The rest of this section is adapted from one section of my chapter, "Varieties of Spiritual Experience: *Shen* in Neo-Confucian Discourse," in Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds., *Confucian Spirituality*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 120-148.

in all their varieties. There are gods of nature (mountains, rivers, etc.); there are gods who were once powerful people, and therefore also ancestors; there are household gods (e.g. Caojun, the stove god); there are bureaucratic gods (e.g. Chenghuang, the city god); and there is the master of them all, the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang dadi or Yuhuang shangdi, the most common modern names for the High Lord of the Shang dynasty, Di/Shangdi). All of these are *shen*, who were and are clearly and unambiguously worshipped as gods. Then there are the spirits of the Confucian sages (*shengren*) and worthies (*xian*), such as Confucius and his chief disciples, and Mencius, who were installed in government-established temples and accorded special rites. They are like the patron gods of various occupations (e.g. shoemakers, printers, dyers), who were also once historical individuals.

Confucius was famously reticent concerning ghosts and spirits, and the Neo-Confucians were very much aware of this. As mentioned earlier, Confucius had said, "Respect ghosts and spirits, but keep them at a distance." And when a disciple asked about "serving ghosts and spirits" he replied, "When one is not yet able to serve other people, how can one serve ghosts?" When the disciple asked about death, Confucius said, "When one does not yet understand life, how can one understand death?" (*Analects* 11:11).

Statements like these do not mean that Confucius did not believe in ghosts and spirits; they reflect, rather, his attempts to redirect the attention of the literati of his day to the urgent social, ethical, and political tasks of restoring harmony to a society wracked by war and political strife. He felt that what was most urgent was the moral revitalization of the ruling class, and that the way to achieve this was not to court the favor of gods and ancestors but to revive the idealized Way or ways of the benevolent sage-kings who had founded the Zhou dynasty some five hundred years earlier. While this Way included worship of ancestors and various gods, such worship without proper understanding and reverence was meaningless and ineffective, and even with understanding and reverence was no substitute for good government. So Confucius stressed learning, thinking, and moral self-cultivation as the key to good government and meaningful ritual. "If one is not humane (*ren*), what can he have to do with ritual?" (*Analects* 3:3).

The Neo-Confucians went considerably further than Confucius in distancing themselves from popular worship of ghosts and spirits – except for ancestral spirits, which I'll discuss in a

moment. While not denying the existence of ghosts, Zhu Xi and his school "rationalized" or "naturalized" them to a considerable degree. That is, they interpreted them as functions of the natural processes of *qi*. Zhang Zai (1020-1077, one of Zhu Xi's predecessors), for example, said, "Ghosts and spirits are the inherent potential (*liang-neng*) of the two [modes of] *qi*."²⁵ Another predecessor, Cheng Yi (1033-1107) said, in a similar vein, "Ghosts and spirits are traces of the creative process."²⁶ Zhu Xi himself said, "The same principles (*li*) apply to human beings, heaven and earth, ghosts and spirits."²⁷ And Zhu's disciple Chen Chun (1159-1223) said, "Ghosts and spirits are nothing more than the contraction and expansion, coming and going, of *yin* and *yang qi*."²⁸

As these statements suggest, the terms *gui* and *shen* were thoroughly integrated into Neo-Confucian natural philosophy. Zhu Xi was primarily interested in correlating the terms with the most fundamental polarity, *yin* and *yang*, thereby making it possible to incorporate all aspects of spirit and spirituality into his comprehensive religio-philosophical system. For this he relied primarily on his Northern Song predecessors, Zhang Zai and Cheng Yi, arguing that the terms *gui* and *shen* could be used to describe impersonal, empirically observable manifestations of *qi*.

In popular belief ghosts and spirits were personal, conscious beings who could be

²⁵ *Zheng-meng* (Correcting Youthful Ignorance), in *Zhangzi quanshu* (Zhang Zai's Complete Writings) (Sibu beiyao ed.), section 10; cf. Chan, *Source Book*, 505; quoted frequently, e.g. by Chen Chun in *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:6a, p. 611. Chen explains *liang-neng* as "the spontaneous ability of the two [modes of] *qi* to expand and contract, or go and come" (ibid.) – i.e. the inherent dynamism of *qi*. See also Ch'en Ch'un, *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained: The Pei-hsi tzu-i*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 143.

²⁶ *Yichuan Yijuan* (Cheng Yi's Commentary on the *Yijing*) (Congshu jicheng ed.), 2: 82); and *Er Cheng quanshu* (Sibu beiyao ed.), 1:7b. Cheng had also referred to *gui* and *shen* as "functions of Heaven and earth" (quoted by Zhu Xi, *Zhongyong zhangju* in *Sishu jizhu* [Sibu beiyao ed.]: 8b).

²⁷ Zhu Xi, *Zhouyi benyi* (The Original Meaning of the *Yijing*) (1177; rpt. Taipei: Hualian, 1978), 1:9a, comment on *Wenyan*, hexagram 1.

²⁸ *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:6a, p. 611; cf. *Neo-Confucian Terms Explained*, p. 143. Daniel K. Gardner has thoroughly documented Zhu Xi's beliefs on *gui-shen* in "Ghosts and Spirits in the Sung Neo-Confucian World: Chu Hsi on *Kuei-shen*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115.4 (1995): 598-611, where he places them under three categories: (1) contractive and expansive forces, (2) ghosts, monsters, and spirits, and (3) ancestral spirits. See also Gardner's "Zhu Xi on Spirit Beings," in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996):106-119.

placated or driven away (e.g. by exorcism or firecrackers), but were fundamentally uncanny. In Neo-Confucian theory *gui* and *shen* operated according to the natural principle of *yin* and *yang* and were therefore capable (at least theoretically) of being rationally understood. Ghosts and spirits were therefore part of the *natural* world, but one should not be overly concerned with them. There is an obvious parallel here with the Buddhist attitude towards gods, which acknowledges their existence but rejects their relevance to the goal of religious life and practice. Ancestral spirits, however, were another matter. Since ancestor worship had been incorporated into Confucian thought and practice from the very beginning, and had been philosophically elaborated in the doctrines of filial piety (*xiao*) and ritual propriety (*li*, originally referring primarily to ancestral sacrifice), the Neo-Confucians never questioned the real existence of ancestral spirits; yet they too were simply "traces of the creative process."

The basis of this creative process is *qi* in all its forms. As mentioned earlier, *qi* is inherently dynamic and inherently life-giving or creative. As Cheng Yi said, "Once there is *qi* there is natural generativity/life."²⁹ Both Daoists and Neo-Confucians recognize three different "phases" of *qi* in the human body, roughly corresponding to what we might call liquid, gaseous, and spiritual phases. The liquid phase is *jing*, or "vital essence," which is seen in most concentrated form in the life-giving fluids, semen and blood. The "gaseous" phase is *qi* in a narrower sense, corresponding more to its original meaning of "vital breath." The most refined phase is *shen* or "spirit." Zhu Xi's chief disciple, Huang Gan, said, for example:

Human life is simply *jing* and *qi*.... Vital essence (*jing*) and blood, warmth and vapor (*qi*) each have pure, numinous awareness (*xuling zhijue*) within them. The pure, numinous awareness of vital essence and blood is the *po* (*yin* soul). The pure, numinous awareness of warmth and vapor is the *hun* (*yang* soul).³⁰

"Pure, numinous awareness" (*xuling zhijue*) is thus characteristic of *qi* itself; it is the inherent capacity of consciousness in the finer forms of *qi*. Thus the potential for an attenuated

²⁹ *Henan Chengshi Yishu*, ch. 15, in *Er Cheng ji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 148.

³⁰ *Xingli daquan shu*, 28:25a, p. 620. Although *xu* is more literally translated as "empty," I use "pure" here, in the sense of "pure consciousness" (i.e. consciousness without an object), which conveys a clearer and more appropriate meaning in this context.

form of consciousness is inherent in the fundamental substrate that constitutes all things in the natural world. Life, consciousness, and spirit are emergent properties of *qi* that naturally appear at higher levels of biological complexity. They do not need to be "breathed into" humanity, as God breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2:7.

Western religions in China

All three of the Abrahamic traditions have found niches in China. Judaism was brought by merchants on the Silk Road, at least by the Tang dynasty (618-906) and possibly earlier. By the 12th century there was a substantial Jewish community, with a synagogue, in Kaifeng (first capital of the Song dynasty) and smaller communities in several coastal cities. By the mid-19th century the Kaifeng community had become almost completely assimilated into Han Chinese culture, with no one left who could read their Torahs and very little understanding of what being Jewish meant, beyond avoiding pork and practicing a few unique family rituals. Today there are several hundred Chinese Jews left in Kaifeng, and since the 1980s some of them have been reviving their Jewish heritage.

Islam also entered China in the Tang dynasty but had a much greater impact than Judaism, initially through militaristic, colonialist expansion and later through the charismatic influence of Sufi masters in central Asia. Today the majority of the population of Xinjiang Province, in the far west, are Muslim Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking ethnic group. The second largest group of Muslims in China are called Hui, who are essentially Han Chinese except for their connection with Islam – the only one of China's fifty-six official ethnic groups defined solely by their religion – although many of them are completely secular.

Christianity was imported in four different waves: by so-called "Nestorian" Christians (the Syrian Church, or Church of the East) beginning in the Tang dynasty; by Franciscan missionaries following Marco Polo's famous sojourn in 13th-century China; by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries; and by Protestant missionaries in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet after all this missionary activity, by 1949 less than 1% of the Chinese population was affiliated with any Christian church. The first few decades of Communist rule in China were, of course, extremely hostile to all forms of religion, indigenous or not. Anti-religious

indoctrination was intense, and any lingering religious belief was forced underground. Today, after thirty years of social and economic liberalization, we are witnessing an incredible resurgence of religion in China. This includes not only the five officially-sanctioned religions – Daoism, Buddhism, Protestant Christianity, Catholic Christianity, and Islam – but also popular religion, which is officially designated as "superstition" (*mixin*), and Confucianism, which is considered a socio-ethical philosophy, not a religion. The number of Christians in China today is estimated to be as high as 11-12%.³¹ The fastest growth is occurring among evangelical Protestants in rural areas, who find some aspects of evangelical Christianity to resonate with certain aspects of Chinese popular religion, such as the practices of spirit-mediums. According to one scholar, "almost all forms of Protestant Christianity in China tend to be evangelical, lay centred, non-liturgical, decentralised, diffuse, and influenced by both Western theologies and Chinese cultural traditions."³²

It would therefore be a mistake to assume that the recent growth of Christianity in China is occurring without influence from traditional Chinese thought patterns. So what I would like to do now is to suggest some of the fundamental differences in worldview that should be taken into account in the comparative study of Chinese religion.

Logical order and aesthetic order

In their 1987 book, *Thinking Through Confucius*, David Hall and Roger Ames proposed a way of thinking about two kinds of order or pattern, which they called "logical order" and "aesthetic order."³³ Logical (or "rational") order refers to the correspondence of a particular set of things or events with an *a priori*, transcendent principle or pattern. For example, God creates the world, or imposes order on chaos, and God transcends the world in the sense that the world

³¹ See, for example, J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann, eds., *Religions of the World*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 560.

³² Francis Ching-wah Yip, "Protestant Christianity in Contemporary China," in James Miller, ed., *Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 192.

³³ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 11-25, 131-138.

depends on God but God does not depend on the world. Or according to Plato, things are what they are only insofar as they correspond to their pure forms, which exist prior to and independently of things. Or finally, to give an example from current American socio-political discourse, those who oppose same-sex marriage often do so by relying on a prior, ideal form of the concept of marriage, which is between a man and a woman, and by claiming that same-sex marriage simply is not marriage as so defined. To qualify as marriage requires correspondence with this transcendent, *a priori* principle of marriage.

Aesthetic order, on the other hand, is order that *emerges* from a contingent pattern of particular things or events. It is not their abstract pattern or law but their unique, particular characteristics. It is like cooking a dish based on what's available in the cupboard rather than following a recipe. In the case of same-sex marriage, it means that the concept of marriage is inseparable from the conditions in which it is embedded. Those conditions are constantly changing, and so as society changes, what counts as marriage likewise changes. Hall and Ames use the word "aesthetic" for this type of order because it is determined by what is tangible, the actually existing patterns of things and events (the Greek word *aisthesis* means "tangible").³⁴ Aesthetic order tends to be expressed in a language of *immanence* rather than a language of *transcendence*. As Hall and Ames put it, in such a discourse "laws, rules, principles, or norms have their source in the human, social contexts which they serve."³⁵ This conception of cosmos (order) "is a context that both constitutes and is constituted by the elements which comprise it."³⁶

Hall and Ames' point is that traditional Chinese thought (not just Confucian thought) displays more features of aesthetic order than logical order, while the opposite is true of traditional Western thought. These are ideal categories that are not mutually exclusive: in fact they often overlap and coexist in particular concepts or theories.³⁷ But as a general observation I have found this way of looking at order extremely useful in understanding traditional Chinese

³⁴ Ibid., 133.

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ Ibid., 17.

³⁷ Ibid., 136.

thought. For example, both the Confucian and the Buddhist conceptions of personhood are fundamentally relational. For Confucians, a person is *constituted* by his/her familial and social relationships: My being a son, brother, husband, and father are not secondary characteristics; they are what I am. Those relationships can change, of course, and then I would be a different person. Joseph Needham made the same point about the Chinese view of nature:

Things behaved in particular ways not necessarily because of prior actions or impulses of other things, but because their position in the ever-moving cyclical universe was such that they were endowed with intrinsic natures which made that behaviour inevitable for them. If they did not behave in those particular ways they would lose their relational positions in the whole (which made them what they were), and turn into something other than themselves. They were thus parts in existential dependence upon the whole world-organism.³⁸


As these points imply, Chinese thought tends to be process-oriented: change is what is real, not permanence – the exact opposite of what Plato claimed. This perspective is displayed most elegantly in the 4th-century BCE Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, but is also evident in Confucian and Buddhist thought – Buddhism perhaps more prominently in its fundamental doctrine of impermanence (*anītya*). A corollary of this process orientation is the absence of any need to find an absolute origin of the world. There are Chinese creation myths, but they are not considered terribly important and none of them posits anything like *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing). In fact the creators in these myths, such as Pangu and Nüwa, are not even part of the popular religious pantheon. And to reiterate something I said earlier, the fundamental substance of which all things are composed, *qi*, is *inherently* dynamic; change and transformation are its normative state. There is therefore no need to posit any external agent of change, any unmoved mover or uncaused cause.

This raises a question that it might be good to discuss. If the concept of *qi* comprehends the entire continuum of matter, energy and spirit, with gods conceived to be the finest, most refined end of that spectrum, then is there no real distinction between "natural" and

³⁸ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2: *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1956), 281.

"supernatural?" Or, to put it another way, is there is no "supernatural" in Chinese religion? Similarly, if the Confucian concept of Heaven is both transcendent and immanent, which is to say that the transcendence/immanence dichotomy doesn't exist, then is there no real concept of transcendence in Chinese religious thought?

I would offer these suggestions. First, "transcendence" comes from a Latin word (*transcendere*) that means "to go beyond." If we understand transcendence as a *process* rather than a *state*, to be consistent with the process orientation of Chinese thought, then we find that the process of *transcending* our given condition is in fact fundamental to Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism. The Confucian sage, while fully human and not divine, has gone beyond the ordinary human condition by fully actualizing the moral potential inherent in us all. And that innate moral potential is given by Heaven, which is the ultimate source of being and value. The Daoist immortal has certainly transcended the ordinary bounds of life, but has done so by nourishing the spiritual potential of his/her own *qi*. In Mahayana Buddhism it is claimed that any person can theoretically become a Buddha in this very life, and a Buddha is one who has transcended the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsara*). Yet one becomes a Buddha by realizing that one's own nature is already characterized by wisdom and compassion, which are one's Buddha-nature. Thus in all three text-based Chinese religions, transcendence is primarily a process of self-transformation, not an *a priori* state of divinity against which our humanity is measured.

Chinese religious thought is fundamentally characterized by a certain kind of "non-duality." This is not the kind of non-duality seen in the *Upanishads* or in the Advaita Vedanta school of Hindu philosophy championed by the 8th-century sage Sankara. Sankara's non-dualism was really monism: only one thing is truly real (Brahman), and all perceived differences are illusory (*maya*). Chinese non-dualism is best illustrated by the model of *yin* and *yang*, which are complementary poles of a single reality. The familiar *taiji*, or *yin-yang* symbol, illustrates this quite nicely: . The difference between *yin* and *yang* is real, but they cannot exist without each other, like the polarity of north and south, or positive and negative. This kind of non-duality characterizes the relationship of mind and body in traditional Chinese thought. There is no ontological distinction between mind and body, because mind is one of the functional modes of

qi. Similarly, humans and gods are different but not ontologically different. In fact, many of the gods in the Chinese popular and Daoist pantheons were formerly human beings.

The significance of this middle ground between monism and dualism for an understanding of Chinese thought cannot be exaggerated. It makes possible a worldview in which rationality does not preclude or conflict with a sense of awe and an appreciation of mystery. As Zhu Xi put it,

Yang ... is the beginning of things; *yin* ... is the end of things. If we are able to trace back to their beginnings and understand how they are generated, then we can turn to their ends and understand how they die. This is the ineffable mystery (*buyan zhi miao*) of the orderly process of creation, flowing from past to present throughout heaven and earth.³⁹

This way of thinking allows for "ineffable mystery," but does not segregate it to a spiritual realm that is ontologically distinct from the mundane, physical realm. The ineffable mystery of creation is inherent in the world, not extrinsic to it. Christian process theologians, such as John Cobb and Gordon Kaufman, have said very much the same thing, based primarily on the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. Whether they have also been influenced in part by exposure to traditional Chinese religious thought I cannot say. But I think it highly likely that some of the most creative philosophical and theological work in the future will take seriously the insights to be gained through the continuing exploration of the theistic and non-theistic dimensions of Chinese religion.

³⁹ Zhu Xi, *Zhuzi Taijitu shuo jie* (Master Zhu's commentary on the "Discussion of the Supreme Polarity Diagram"), in Zhang Boxing, comp., *Zhou Lianxi xiansheng quanji* (Zhou Dunyi's Collected Works) (1708; rpt. in *Zhengyi tang quanshu* [Baibu congshu jicheng ed.]), 1:31a.