

CHINESE RELIGION

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Introduction China's geographic position far from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Indus River civilizations allowed for its culture to evolve largely independent of most others in the ancient world. Many of its earliest art forms, religions, language(s) and other cultural markers were not found elsewhere. In later periods (the classical and post-classical epochs), the cross-pollination of culture and knowledge occurred with some regularity as China discovered other peoples and Chinese culture was, in turn, discovered by others. Buddhism, gunpowder, Chinese characters, and the magnetic compass are all examples of the free flow of ideas into and out of China. Still, Chinese culture is unique for its continuity and the scope of its influence. In particular, Confucianism was and remains a powerful religious and philosophical force in East Asia and beyond. Chinese characters spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam and led to the development of the orthography of all these languages. Chinese notions on aesthetics, lithography and beauty have long been the standard for one quarter of the world's population. In short, Chinese culture is among the richest and most transcendent ever to be produced.

Early Different Cultures. The geographic area of modern China is vast and allowed for the creation of a number of different identifiable cultures in the neolithic period. Of the dozen or so known early cultures, three stand apart. First, the culture of the Wei River Valley (where it meets the Yellow River at the great bend) is perhaps the most well-known among scholars. Several archaeological sites have been explored in modern Shaanxi, Henan and Shanxi provinces. This culture is called Yangshao, so named because it is the contemporary village closest to the first digs. The Yangshao culture is considered to be extremely important because the earliest known monarchy, the Xia Dynasty, which spanned the late neolithic and early Bronze ages, is known to have been located in this area. The Xia Dynasty (2100 BCE-1600 BCE), was thought for many years by scholars to be more myth than verifiable kingdom. In the past few decades, however, it has become clear that this, one of the cradles of Chinese civilization, also birthed the first historical state. A second important early culture spans the Yangtze delta region, extends from the coast inland for at least 150 miles, north as far as Jiangsu province and south as far Zhejiang province. It is believed that there was a great deal of cross-pollination of technology, agriculture and culture between these two early groups, although the way of life in an area with abundant rainfall, moderate climate, and extremely fertile land was quite different than life on the semi-arid northern Chinese plain. During the Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE-1046 BCE), these two unique cultures expanded, intermingled and essentially created northern Chinese culture. The third culture is much further south and is understood to be the cradle of the still distinctive southern Chinese culture. Archaeological sites showing markers for this culture have been found in the coastal provinces of Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi and the island of Taiwan. Vietnam also lays claim to this, the Dapenkeng culture, but the Chinese are not enthusiastic about acknowledging the possible connection.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic Age (10,000-2000 BCE)

Early Religion. Given that each clan or group existed as linked but fairly independent units, religion for most of neolithic era China varied significantly. Customs and rituals were different from place to place and throughout time. Shamans likely led animistic rituals and acted as spiritual leaders. However, there is no evidence of an organized religion as we understand it in the contemporary world. Nonetheless, the early Chinese people were very spiritual and sought meaning in life through the supernatural. Most of what is known about late neolithic culture has been gleaned piecemeal through the excavation of burial sites and tombs. A few known tombs from the late neolithic were richly adorned with jade and other high-value objects, indicating the deceased was of high status in society. In these high status tombs, the remains of humans sacrificed along with the decedent have sometimes also been found. Most of the tombs discovered, however, are much more modest. Interred alongside human remains were ceramic jars, the number of which increased as the late neolithic period progressed. Residue found in the jars indicates that millet, rice or other food stuffs sometimes followed the deceased on their journey to the afterlife. Many of the ceramic jars were decorated with motifs that depicted local deities or beliefs. In some tombs, clay figures of animals have been discovered, indicating potential veneration of animal spirits. In others, jade or clay figures representing the human form have been found. One of the characteristic elements in late neolithic Chinese funerary is ancestor worship. The connection to Confucianism and filial piety is tantalizing, but unproven.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

Early Religion. Our knowledge of early Bronze Age culture is largely limited to that which archaeologists have been able to reveal through excavations. In particular, our knowledge of the religion practiced in early Bronze Age China is limited to the existence of bone divination. It is believed that a holy man or shaman wrote on animal bones, heated them and interpreted them based on how they responded to heat. He or she acted as something of an oracle in this rather elaborate ritual. Other vestiges of “civil religion” from the late Bronze Age remain in the form of the Jade Emperor and the concept of heaven, earth and the underworld. The Jade Emperor ruled over the heavenly court. The ruler of earth was known as the Son of Heaven. In this way, the concept of the “Mandate of Heaven” began to emerge to describe the divine right of monarchs to rule in the Zhou period (1046 BCE-475 BCE). Part of the job of the monarch was to maintain harmony between heaven and earth. It is interesting to note that monarchs could and very often did lose the “Mandate of Heaven.” In practice, this could happen if a monarch ruled poorly, taxed the people too heavily or otherwise engaged in behavior inappropriate for the Son of Heaven. Earthly harmony was then lost.

IRON AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Confucianism. The most important religion to emerge in the Iron Age was Confucianism. Unlike Buddhism, it is indigenous to China. Confucianism originated with the historical figure, Master Kung (Kung Fuzi), who was born in the kingdom of Lu in approximately 551 BCE. Though Confucius lived in a highly fragmented, fluid political environment, generational memory existed of a golden age, a fabled time of stability when sage-rulers governed judiciously and with integrity. Confucius was the quintessential wandering sage, a teacher who moved between the many kingdoms of China offering his knowledge and services to whomever he encountered. Confucius taught that rulers and the ruled should act in a moral fashion and that if everyone understood their place in society and acted in accordance with his teachings, society would function as it had in the days of old. Confucianism was a very public religion in the early Iron Age. It applied the patriarchal family system and filial piety to the state. The emperor was to act as the great father and the people were to follow and revere the emperor as they would their father or ancestors. The most well-known of Confucius teachings are found in the *Analects* (sayings). The *Analects* were compiled by Confucius’ disciples in the years after his death. No works written by Confucius himself are known to have ever existed. Confucianism was widely practiced in the years before the Qin came to power, but began to flourish during the period of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) when it was adopted by the authorities as a model of moral and social rectitude. Confucianism is not a monotheistic religion, does not have a well-articulated theory on the afterlife and emphasizes the present rather than the hereafter. Today, Confucianism in China is largely a philosophy and is not widely practiced as a religion.

Daoism. Daoism emerged at roughly the same time as Confucianism and is often described by Chinese scholars as its near opposite. Whereas Confucianism was a public religion, Daoism was private. In fact, throughout most of history, many Chinese were willing to embrace both because they addressed different areas of life. Whereas Confucian philosophy is exoteric and provides a practical, moral code for public life, Daoist ideology emphasizes the esoteric, the mystical and provides a guide for private life. There are two major texts in Daoism which are associated with the philosophers Laozi (604-531 BCE) and Zhuangzi (370-287 BCE). Though there is no evidence that either of these two were real historical figures, they are credited with compiling the foundational texts entitled the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. These works are believed to have been compiled over a period of centuries and served to explain the *Way* (the Dao). The philosophy of Daoism does not seek to find the single, objective truth, but rather points to the Dao as one way of understanding truth. Other than the Jade Emperor, it is difficult to speak of a single, monotheistic deity in Daoism. Daoism, like all Chinese religions, has not fared well under the leadership of the government of the People’s Republic of China. Other religions, such as Buddhism, have such a small number of followers today that they have very little influence on society in the People’s Republic.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism flourished during most of the Tang period. In the years since its founding in the 5th century BCE on the border between Nepal and India, Buddhism had slowly become more and more accepted in China. During the early Han period (206 BCE-220 CE), it was a religion with very few followers, in part because it had to compete with two other well-established religions: Confucianism and Daoism. Nonetheless, as it took on more and more Chinese characteristics, it slowly gained followers late in the Han period. In so doing, however, it looked less like the religion which had been an offshoot of Hinduism. We know the branch of Buddhism that

flourished in Northeast Asia as Mahayana (greater vehicle) Buddhism. This is to distinguish it from Hinayana (lesser vehicle) Buddhism practiced in Southeast Asia.

State Support for Buddhism. Unlike Confucianism, Buddhism minimizes the importance of the temporal world and emphasizes the afterlife. It is therefore easy to understand that in the political chaos following the collapse of the Han in the 3rd century CE that this religion would naturally appeal to larger segments of the population. By the time of the early Tang period, it was a major religion, supported by the crown and given special tax and landholding privileges. However, state sanction of any religion is a problematic situation. A monarch can easily withdraw support, require the clergy to bless a poor decision or otherwise change the religious landscape in very short order. During the reign of the Empress Wu (624-705), the Confucians had been savage critics of her policies and, in particular, her usurpation of the throne. In an effort to undermine their authority, she moved the crown even closer to the Buddhist institutions. Upon her death, the special privileges they had enjoyed were stripped from them. Much of the land they had acquired over hundreds of years was taken and many of the temples themselves were shuttered. In the aftermath of the death of Empress Wu, the practice of Buddhism was not always proscribed by law, but it was clearly frowned upon.

Cultural Backlash. After Empress Wu, Tang China appears to have undergone a conservative backlash in more ways than just religion. The state removed some of the incentives that foreigners enjoyed in the capital city of Chang'an. It was also no longer legal to socialize with foreigners and many left China altogether or went to other cities. Buddhism, as an indisputably foreign religion, suffered as a result as well. And there was a state-sanctioned renaissance of Confucianism. In addition, the rich cultural expressions and outbursts of creativity that had characterized the early Tang period were found with less frequency.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

Lamaist Buddhism. Whereas Confucianism had dominated the religious landscape in China since the late Tang period (618-807) among the Han ethnicity, Buddhism experienced a minor renaissance during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The Buddhism practiced by the Qing monarchs, however, was not like that of most of the previous periods. Instead, the Manchu followed Tibetan Buddhism, a form of the religion which emphasizes Lamaism. Lamaism is a form of meditative Buddhism that transmits knowledge and religious convention from the teacher (Lama) to student. In Tibetan Buddhism, it is believed that a series of great Lamas, such as the Dalai Lama or Panchen Lama, are reincarnated bodhisattvas who bring wisdom and knowledge to their students. The Mongols (Yuan Dynasty, 1271-1368) also practiced Tibetan Buddhism, but, like the Qing, did not impose it on the Confucian population. Nonetheless, it was not proscribed. Buddhist practice is often not monotheistic and the Qing monarchs were very willing to lead in corporate, ritual worship at the Temple of Heaven as an element of the civil religion promoted by the crown. Christianity was also evident in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and Qing periods. However, the numbers of adherents was very, very small—much smaller than the number of Christians during the Tang and Yuan periods. Still, a number of Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries made their way to China and provided accounts of life during their stay. These include men such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) and Adam Schall Von Bell (1591-1666). It is estimated that as many as one-hundred thousand Christians may have existed in China in the late Qianlong period (1735-1796).

The 19th CENTURY

Traditional Confucianism. Chinese civilization was very mature (some may view it as ancient) by the 19th century. No new religions or governing philosophies emerged to challenge the orthodoxy of Confucianism and Daoism. The only exception was the Taiping movement (1850-1864), which was so violent and heretical in its belief system that many Chinese Christians were unable to support even its spiritual elements. As might be expected, there was a backlash among the governing elites against Christianity in the post-Taiping era. Indeed, in the decade or so after the Taiping Rebellion, there was a strong reactive movement to return China to its true Confucian path. There were several “self-strengthening” reforms instituted, most of which had as a stated goal the return of the people to more moral and upright behavior among all segments of society. When the final of the “self-strengthening” reforms (the 100 Days of Reform) was instituted in 1898, it had as one of its core elements the re-interpretation of Confucianism which, if taken to its logical end, could have questioned the political position of the Empress Dowager (1835-1908). For his trouble, the Emperor Guangxu (1871-1908)—who had supported and promoted this effort—was effectively placed under house arrest where he was assassinated in 1908 by arsenic

poisoning. It appeared that traditional Confucianism, as interpreted by the ruling elites, was sacrosanct from both the spiritual and political perspective.

Readings

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