

Unit 3c: Foundational Beliefs--Chinese Religions

Objectives

At the end of this unit, you will

Be aware of the following

- Syncretistic nature of Chinese folk religious practice
- Sacredness of the natural world within Chinese religious thought
- Importance of self-cultivation, community and tradition in Confucian thought and practice
- Alternative offered by Taoist practice to Confucian thought

Identify

- Yin-Yang
- Lineage
- Hsiao
- Feng-shui
- Shaman
- Tao

Realize

- Influence of Confucian thought and culture throughout East Asia
- Yin-Yang and family importance to Confucian belief
- Importance of lineage in Chinese religious thought
- Transcendence and long life as a major theme of Taoist thought
- Major divisions of Taoism

Foundational Beliefs: Chinese Religions

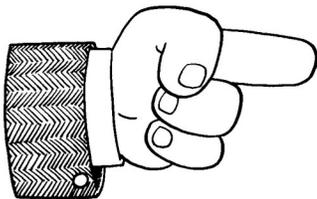
"Traditionally, every Chinese was Confucian in ethics and public life, Taoist in private life and hygiene, and Buddhist at time of death, with a healthy dash of shamanistic folk religion thrown in along the way."

-- Huston Smith, The World's Religions, p. 189.

Estimates vary as to the breakdown of Chinese religious groups today. One appraisal lists the following: Non-religious--50%; Chinese religions (Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism)--28%; Indigenous belief--2% (especially among the peoples of the south); Muslim--2.4%; Christian--5%; and Atheist--12%.

(Almanac of the Christian World, p. 103.)

Authors Hu Wenzhong and Cornelius Grove concur with philosopher Bertrand Russell's remark that *"the Chinese are among the most unreligious people on earth...Only a small minority are devout Buddhists and fewer still are Christians."* (Encountering the Chinese, p. 28.)



Whatever the estimate, the great influence of Confucian thought and culture throughout East Asia cannot be denied.

The Chinese world view sees little separation between religion and culture. Within Chinese languages, there was not a specific word for religion until modern times. To describe its religion is to address broad issues of culture. Two major cosmological themes are present in this cultural world view--the metaphor of the Yin-Yang and the family nature of religious belief.

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I. Underlying Concepts.

1. Yin and Yang (yin, yahng), expresses the apotropaic nature of faith, that is, the dualistic turning or casting away evil while seeking to attract the good. Yin and Yang forces are in a constant state of interplay within the universe. While possessing an inherent tension, they are also complementary.



The following chart demonstrates the qualities of Yin and Yang.

Yin

- Dark side of mountain
 - Moist from dew, flowers closed, cold
 - Humans: death, dark, ghosts, "flesh" which rots away
 - Body/grave
 - Ghost
 - Grave
 - Fear
 - Intelligence

Yang

- Light side of mountain
 - Sunlight in morning, warm, dry, "open up, expand, arise"
 - Gods, health, powerful things, "bones" which remain
 - Spirit[s]
 - Ancestor
 - Tablet/shrine
 - Awe
 - Honor

2. Family "Family" religion is another form of Chinese religious culture. Rather than "ancestor worship," a more correct understanding is "lineage"--the tracing of the line from living members back many generations to one common ancestor.

Reverence for ancestors, one's primary obligation of a religious sort, involves ritual, manners and the cultivation of social and family graces. Funeral rites and remembrance ceremonies for the dead give honor to the aged as wise, and the dead as most wise.



Under the assumption that the afterworld is similar to this one--with needs like food, money, housing and clothing, worshipers make offerings at home shrines, either in the form of food or paper likenesses of real objects.

The reciprocal benefits of this reverence shown help the ancestor--so that he or she will not fade into oblivion. The descendants in turn receive their ancestor's aid in the form of spiritual influences brought to bear on their worldly well-being.

Departed spirits become the objects of hsiao (sheeou, filial piety), a term describing the honor and reverence children show to both living and dead parents. Hsiao also defines the reciprocal way elders have a responsibility to produce sons, thus carrying on their family line.

The concepts of family and yin/yang underlie all Chinese religious expressions, be they folk, Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist thought and practice.

3. Syncretistic Folk Religion To combine different aspects of faith and practice is a common trait of belief on the "street-level" of Chinese society. By the late nineteenth century, some 80% of the country adhered to folk religion. This religious expression combined ancestor veneration, Confucian ethics, devotion to local deities, Chinese universalism, some Buddhism, and practices related to fortune telling, divination, magic, and sorcery (superstition).

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Even today, despite the pressures of the communist state, this amalgam of influences, though not uniform or equal, is found in many Chinese individuals and families.



As stated by the authors of the Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit--China,

On a day-to-day level the Chinese are much less concerned with the high-minded philosophies and asceticism of Buddha, Confucius or Lao Tzu than they are with the pursuit of worldly success, the appeasement of the dead and the spirits, and the seeking of hidden knowledge about the future...

The most important concept in the Chinese popular religious vocabulary is luck...Gods have to be appeased, bad spirits blown away and sleeping dragons soothed to keep luck on one's side." (p. 67)

This concern with luck finds expression in two popular forms of folk religious practice, Feng-shui and use of the Shaman.

a. Feng-shui (FUHNG-sway), the system of divination whereby seers select potential sites for graves, homes or temples, is an ancient method of harmonizing humans with universal powers, bringing about good or bad fortunes to those who wish to build.



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A special compass (lo-p'an [luhaw-pahn]) is used to determine the proper location of a new structure. The location of a window, doorway or ancestral grave can exert a great influence on one's fortune.

b. Shamans (SHAH-men; SHAY-men)

Shamans are popular religious healers and diviners. They bring a local community into relationship with the supernatural.

Often using objects seen in dreams--stones, bones, animal skins or feathers--shamans incorporate such items into a rite of dramatic ritual and song.

4. Nature



Nature, the sacred, essential context of human existence, is seen as the mixture and proportion of the five vital forces: water, fire, wood, metal and earth. The whole world becomes sacred. Structure, balance and harmony enable humankind to flourish with this natural world. Nature becomes the source of inspiration not only for life, but for aesthetics as well.

In this world of nature, god is not "wholly other." No clear outside creator god exists. The Chinese divinity thus becomes equated with "life force." Heaven--as part of nature itself--becomes a source for morality, meaning and self-transformation.

II. Confucian Belief

"The fundamental concern of the Confucian tradition is learning to be human."

--Tu Wei-ming (in Our Religions, p. 141).

Three dimensions of the human condition--the self, community, and tradition--are expressed in Confucian spirituality.

1. Self-cultivation

A healthy body, mind-and-heart alert, pure soul and brilliant spirit, are seen as good for their own sake. This self-transformation draws resources from cultural tradition, a sympathetic society, the energy of nature and power of heaven.



Confucius sought dignity for all humankind, a sense of respect for oneself and understanding of the humanity found in all. (See the Lonely Planet Survival Kit--China, p. 64.)

Tu Wei-ming, Professor of Chinese History and Philosophy at Harvard University, identifies three characteristics of the "human rootedness" of Confucian thought.

a. Cheng (juhng) designates the state of absolute quiet and inactivity, being sincere, authentic, real. One can be genuinely human without engaging in a flurry of activities.

b. Shen (shen) signifies spirituality. Crucial Shen concerns are the "heavenly aspect of the soul" and its development.

c. Chi (jee). Based upon the cumulative effect of self-transformation, Chi, an "originating power, an inward spring of activity...a critical point at which one's direction toward good or evil is set" can be identified and used to further 'flourish the soul.' (Tu Wei-ming in Our Religions, pp. 169-170.)

2. Community The community is necessary for this self-transformation to occur. It broadens and deepens the self, expressing the fundamental integration of all segments of our world. Once rooted, the soul contributes to the five visions that identify the classic Confucian vision of the world.

The five visions are: (1) ability to respond to the world in a poetic sense; (2) social sense of ritual as means for verbal and non-verbal communication within the "human community;" (3) historical ability to relate to the collective memory; (4) politics as responsive and responsible to the whole community; and (5) the metaphysical interconnectedness of all things. (See Tu Wei-ming, in Our Religions, p. 195.)

3. Tradition



Throughout their shared history spanning millennia, the people of China valued harmony and mutual consensus rather than conflict and individual exertion.

Historian Barbara Tuchman writes, "The people of China...stayed in one place, enclosed by a series of walls, around house and village or city. Tied to the soil, living under the authority of the family, growing their food among the graves of their ancestors, they were perpetuators of a system in which harmony was more important than struggle." (Stilwell and the American Experience in China, p. 156.)

During Confucius's life, societal conflict, rather than harmony, was the norm. Believing there

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had been an earlier period of prosperity and peace in
China,

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Confucius advocated a return to the traditions and values of that earlier time. These traditions--which maintained peace and social order--became the focus of Confucian thought.

Professor Samuel Huntington describes China's reliance upon her traditional (Confucian) culture even today. Since the late 1970s, Chinese leadership focused on involvement in the world economy while demonstrating a recommitment to traditional ways.



At the end of the superpower competition, China *"set two goals: to become the champion of Chinese culture...and to resume its historical position, which it lost in the nineteenth century, as the [supreme] power in East Asia."* (Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, pp. 105, 168.)

III. Taoist Belief

"The two essential ideals of the Taoist religion are individual longevity or immortality, and social harmony and peace..."

-- Liu Xiaogan, "Taoism" (in Our Religions, pp. 274, 233.)

Taoist belief draws from indigenous Chinese religion and incorporates that thought into its schema. Visiting scholar Liu Xiaogan of Princeton University identifies the following concerning the Taoist system. It absorbs gods, spirits and ghosts into its worldview. And it incorporates ancient practice--offerings for ancestors, freedom from evil spirits, prayers said on behalf of favorable weather. (See Our Religions, p. 284.)

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This foundation explains the popularity, on an individual level, of the religion.

To understand Taoism is to appreciate the alternative world view it offered to Confucianism. Confucianism--classical, socially oriented, geared to public functions of Chinese families and the state, accepting of social duty and responsibility with an influx of rules, laws, ceremonies and traditions--soon became a system of social and psychological pressure.



A diversion was needed. With romantic simplicity, openness and artistic wisdom, Taoism offered a departure. Withdraw from the endless struggle and conflict...prize the individual life. Seek unity with nature. Obtain inner space and peace, freed from the excesses of confining Confucian practicality.

1. Major Themes Tao, as the "path" or "way," emphasizes major themes.

a. Transcendence Taoism seeks to surpass the limits of the ordinary. It seeks an ultimate reality which is behind all, a mystical insight which is beyond the scope of words.

*"As a thing the way is
Shadowy, indistinct.
Indistinct and shadowy,
Yet within it is an image;
Shadowy and indistinct,
Yet within it is a substance."*

-- Tao Te Ching, XXI:49 (trans. D.C. Law, p. 78.)

b. Way of the Universe

Taoist thought identifies the way of the universe, the pattern, rhythm, driving power, the ordering principle behind all life. In this sense, Tao (and the Taoist religion), becomes the integrating principle behind all of life.

*"In his every moment a
[person] of great virtue
Follows the way and the
way only.*

-- Tao Te Ching, XXI:48, XI:27
(trans. D.C. Law, p. 78.)



c. Way of Life Tao means the way of human life, that is, the way life should be.

Tao is the natural guiding force which enables all things to realize their full potential...to be fulfilled.

d. Long Life Quest for long life became a Taoist goal. Stemming from the focus on nature, with its rhythm of constant renewal, and trying to emulate that rhythm, Taoism focused on techniques to prolong life. In the Classic of Great Peace, an expression of the common values of the Chinese people, long life became a most important goal between heaven and earth.

Taoist thought sought to conserve life in many ways. In keeping harmony within the spirit and material forces within the body, a life inducing heart, mind and will ensued.



Meditation--focusing one's spirit and so avoiding dissipation--became a valued technique. Consolidation of vital powers so as to resist death became the ideal--not nirvana or release. People die early not because of fate but because their way of living hurts their spirits or bodies. Moderation in the desires and emotions preserved body and soul.

Gods become identified with specific body parts--heart, liver, spleen--and homage to these gods becomes a focus of devotional exercises.

2. Divisions Three main branches of Taoism became prominent, the philosophic, psychic and religious.

a. Philosophic The Taoists philosophy school sought transcendence--a going beyond the limits of this world, a breaking of the bonds of the universe. By reflection and intuition, a person could order his life in accord with the way of the universe. The philosophic tended to become increasingly individualistic and critical. A blank mind became an ideal.

b. Psychic Psychic Taoism focused on yogic exercises and meditations. Exploration of the inner self became the ideal. Selflessness, cleanliness and developing a sense of emotional calm were uppermost. Practitioners thus could mediate a healing, psychic sense of calm over those around them.

"Therefore the sage puts his person last and it comes first,

Treats it as extraneous to himself and it is preserved.

Is it not because he is without thought of self that he is able to accomplish his private ends?"

-- Tao Te Ching, VII:19 (trans. D.C. Law, p. 63.)

c. Religious Religious (popular) Taoism concentrated on long life in the here-and-now. It respected the emperor and the broad Confucianist movement. The practical and social tenets of faith became uppermost. Life lived long and with a minimum amount of friction was the goal.

In addition, this popular school of thought sees gods, magic and sorcery as repositories of the power of the universe. Worship includes rites dealing with ghosts, exorcisms, faith healing, fortune telling and magic.

Vocabulary List: Foundational Beliefs--Chinese Religions

Cheng (juhng) Designates the state of absolute quiet and inactivity, being sincere, authentic, real. One can be genuinely human without engaging in a flurry of activities (Taoist term).

Chi (jee) Based upon the cumulative effect of self-transformation, Chi, an originating power, an inward spring of activity...a critical point at which one's direction toward good or evil is set can be identified and used to further flourish the soul.

Feng-shui (FUHNG-shway) The system of divination whereby seers select potential sites for graves, homes or temples, is an ancient method of harmonizing humans with universal powers, bringing about good or bad fortunes to those who wish to build. A special compass (lo-p'an [luhaw-pahn]) is used to determine the proper location of a new structure.

Hsiao (sheeu, filial piety) Term describing the honor and reverence children show to both living and dead parents. Hsiao also defines the responsibility of elders to produce sons to carry on their family line.

Lineage The tracing of the ancestral line from living members back many generations to one common ancestor

Self-cultivation Confucian ideal of a healthy body, mind-and-heart alert, pure soul and brilliant spirit are seen as good for their own sake.

Shamans (SHAH-men; SHAY-men) Popular religious healers and diviners. They bring a local community into relationship with the supernatural. Often using objects seen in dreams--stones, bones, animal skins or feathers--shamans incorporate such items into a rite of dramatic ritual and song.

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Shen (shen) Signifies spirituality. Crucial Shen concerns are the "heavenly aspect of the soul" and its development (Taoist term).

Syncretistic To combine differing, even contradictory aspects of faith and practice

Review Quiz: Foundational Beliefs--Chinese Religions

Part 1--True or False Place a T or an F in the blank provided.



1. _____ Confucian thought and practice influences only limited sections of present day China.
2. _____ The Chinese language has always had a distinct word for religion.
3. _____ "Ancestor worship" is good terminology to use in describing Chinese religious culture.
4. _____ In China today, Communism has rooted out most syncretistic folk practices in the lives of Chinese citizens.
5. _____ On a day-to-day level, many Chinese people are interested in the philosophies and theoretical discussions of Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu.
6. _____ For much of folk religion, the whole world in some sense becomes sacred.
7. _____ During Confucius' lifetime, society was placid and harmonious.
8. _____ In some ways, Taoism offered an alternative to the Confucian world view.
9. _____ In philosophic Taoism, a blank mind eventually became an ideal.
10. _____ Religious Taoism concentrated on life lived in the hereafter.



Part 2--Multiple Choice Place the letter of the most correct response in the blank provided.

1. _____ One of the foundational concepts of yin/yang is
 - a. a dualistic turning or casting away evil while seeking to attract the good.
 - b. venerate the dead and love yourself.
 - c. speak evil of none but praise of all.

2. _____ Rather than "ancestor worship," a more correct understanding of the family nature of Chinese religion is
 - a. lineage.
 - b. worship of the dead.
 - c. emperor worship.

3. _____ The term hsiao (sheeou) describes
 - a. honor given to the emperor.
 - b. children remembering mothers and father's days.
 - c. honor and reverence children show to living and dead parents.

4. _____ According to the Lonely Planet Survival Kit--China, the most important concept in the Chinese popular religious vocabulary is
 - a. lineage.
 - b. feng-shui.
 - c. luck.

5. _____ Feng-shui is a system which
 - a. assists in selecting sites for grave, homes or buildings.
 - b. helps bring healing for diseases.

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c. enables ancestors to not fade into oblivion.

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6. _____ Shamans are popular
- a. musicians and actors.
 - b. healers and diviners.
 - c. mayor and farming district representatives.
7. _____ The "human rootedness" of Confucian thought shows itself in the
- a. necessity for individuals to engage in a frantic pace of life.
 - b. ability of shamans to prescribe herbal cures to destructive diseases.
 - c. importance of quiet and inactivity--not engaging in a flurry of enterprises.
8. _____ The two essential ideals of Taoist belief are
- a. yin and yang.
 - b. long life and social harmony/peace.
 - c. economic development and helping one's neighbor.
9. _____ The term "Tao" can be defined as
- a. nature at peace.
 - b. the path or way.
 - c. stillness and simplicity.
10. _____ Meditation became a valued technique in Taoist practice to
- a. conserve and prolong life.
 - b. achieve emancipation.
 - c. conquer nature.



"Think serenity."

Sources Used in Foundational Beliefs--Chinese Religions



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Resources for Further Study

Gargan, Edward, "3 Things Matter: Location, Location, Feng Shui," (New York Times, 27 Jan 1997), p. A4.

Current prevalence of Feng Shui practice in China.

Gargan, Edward, "The Master Builder of Malaysia," (New York Times, 27 Mar 1996).

Confucian values spur success of Malaysia entrepreneur.

Mydans, Seth, "Vietnam, a Convert, Pursues Capitalism Devoutly," (New York Times, 5 April 1996), p. A3.

Account of an obscure goddess cult in Thi Cau, Vietnam, whose devotion prompts economic prosperity.

O'Neill, Molly, "Feng Shui Or Feng Phooey?," (New York Times, 9 Jan 1997), p. B1.

Popularity of Feng Shui in present day China.

Teiser, Stephen, "The Spirits of Chinese Religion," in Religions of China in Practice by Donald S. Lopez (ed.), (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996)

See also listings under Unit 9c: Chinese Religious Texts-- Societal Implications.



"Only by teaching can we truly prepare soldiers [sailors, airmen, Marines] to be successful and to survive in combat."
(General John A. Wickham, Jr.)