

Chinese Religion: an introduction

Chinese Religion is a complex blend of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism/Daoism, but scholars are of the opinion that ideas about the divine and ancestors have been kept alive from even earlier world views distinctly Chinese in character.

From Buddhism, Chinese Religion acquired the virtues of abstinence and restraint, perhaps best exemplified by the relatively austere lives of the monks. Buddhism also offers the hope of salvation or liberation through rebirth in Amitabha's (Heavenly Buddha's) Pure Land. Buddhist monks frequently assist at funerals in the hope that their presence will help the deceased achieve salvation or liberation.

From Confucianism, Chinese Religion derived a framework for public life and for family and social ethics. Qualities such as loyalty, respect, restraint, propriety and filial piety are emphasised, as is the importance of balance as exemplified in the famous Yin-Yang symbol (the balance of opposites leads to right thinking and right conduct). Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BCE, is sometimes described as an agnostic or sceptic. But this is not accurate. He regarded the existence of Tien, the absolute principle or supreme being controlling the universe, as a positive force.

From Taoism/Daoism, Chinese Religion acquired ideas associated with Lao Tzu, supposedly a contemporary of Confucius. Lao Tzu ensured that ideas of immortality and mental and physical discipline were firmly embedded in the faith. Also, he ensured that Chinese Religion was replete with many gods and spirits (polytheism is one of Chinese Religion's most obvious characteristics). In other words, it is largely due to Taoism/Daoism that we have gods such as the Jade Emperor, the God of Long Life, the God of the Kitchen and the God of Wealth, all familiar to us because of our knowledge of Yuan Tan, or Chinese New Year.

In many villages, the temple is the centre of social and cultural life as well as a place of religious worship and ritual. Most village temples are run by a committee of lay directors who usually employ a Taoist/Daoist priest to officiate.

Chinese New Year is known of and enjoyed almost universally because of Chinese Religion, but it is merely the best-known festival of the Chinese year. Teng Chieh, fifteen days after New Year, brings the new year celebrations to a formal conclusion, this being the occasion when the first full moon appears in the sky (the sighting of the seventh full moon is also an auspicious occasion. The seventh full moon is called Moon Festival and special cakes called moon cakes are consumed). Ching Ming, which occurs in late Spring, is the occasion when dead plant life is removed from family graves and the gravestones are washed. Chinese families often eat a meal

beside the grave to provide the bodies of dead family members with company. Dragon Boat Festival occurs in Summer and commemorates an honourable official from distant times who lived strictly according to Confucian principles of service to the community. Hungry Ghosts Festival in late Summer or early Autumn is the occasion when people care for spirits who have no surviving family members to look after them, perhaps because the family has died out during war or natural disaster.

Which brings us to perhaps the most interesting aspect of Chinese Religion: dead family members must be cared for. Dead family members inhabit the spirit world. Surviving family members can care for dead relatives by sending gifts to the spirit world. Such gifts comprise of money (it's pretend money, of course, and can be bought inexpensively from most Chinese supermarkets and gift shops), silver and gold leaf, good luck messages and, if the Chinese community is sufficiently large, models of cars, radios, music centres, TVs, yachts, helicopters and airplanes constructed of balsa wood and tissue paper. Gifts destined for dead relatives are burnt in fires in gardens or the streets or, if believers have access to temples, incinerators in the temple courtyards. The smoke carries the gifts to the spirit world where they are enjoyed by the ancestors' spirits.

When followers of Chinese Religion engage in worship in temples they offer up their prayers to one of the gods or to the Buddha, Confucius or Lao Tzu (to the untrained eye it seems as if the Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu have themselves become gods). Before prayers begin the Chinese can say their prayers without priestly mediation they buy a bundle of incense sticks and light them. After blowing out the flames, they approach the statue of one of the gods or the Buddha, Confucius or Lao Tzu (the statues usually stand on tables or altars at the far end of the prayer room opposite the main entrance). The words of the prayer are quietly uttered and the smoke from the incense sticks carries the prayer to Heaven where the gods, the Buddha, Confucius and Lao Tzu are said to reside. Provided the worshipper has been good in the recent past, the prayer will be responded to in a positive manner.

Strictly speaking, Chinese Religion does not have a day comparable to the sabbath in the Abrahamic faiths: every day is sacred and worship should occur on a regular basis. For this reason most Chinese families have small shrines in their homes where worship can be conducted whenever the believer feels the urge.

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