

The Concept of Religion from the Perspective of the Basic Structure of Chinese Religious Tradition

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The word *zongjiao* (宗教) is used today in East Asian countries to signify religion, even though it was coined in the late nineteenth century in an effort to find an equivalent term to the Western word "religion". The word connotes a strong sense of relationship between the divine and the human. Some modern Chinese intellectuals have reacted to the usage of this term in dealing with their cultural heritage.



Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929), a representative of Chinese intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, stated that "our country is unique in that we have had no religion and this distinguishes us from all the other nations."¹ For him religion was synonymous with the superstition of the masses. He emphasized the fact that in Chinese history philosophical thought has always occupied a place superior to religious practices. However, in the same book we find a recognition of the fact that the Chinese have always revered Heaven. He even accepted as characteristic of Chinese civilization that the Way of the Human should follow the Way of Heaven. In other words, for Liang Qichao the concept of Heaven and its close tie with the way of Human have nothing to do with religion.

Even today Confucians in Taiwan try to avoid the term *Rujiao* (儒教) fearing that Confucianism may be identified with

any religion. Dissociating themselves from *jiao* (教), they call Confucian tradition *Rujia* (儒家), the school of Confucianism. This term was used first by Sima Qian and originally denoted a group of scholars who followed the teaching of Confucius in contrast to those of Laozi, Mozi, etc. A little more liberal thinker, such as Mou Zongsan (牟宗三) of Hong Kong, has been willing to recognize "a religious dimension" in Confucianism in his analysis of the Way of Heaven. But he also made a special effort to point out differences between notions of God and those of the Way of Heaven. He concluded that Confucianism is not a religion but an ethical philosophy with a religious element which has a unique color of its own.²

When Western scholars write about Chinese religion, they are obviously influenced by the Western concept of religion. In this study I would like to probe into what that inner push (religion), which provides energy and ultimateness for the transformation of life as a whole, could and should mean in the context of Chinese cultural tradition.

I. The Concept of Teaching in the *Analects*

Confucius in the *Analects* presents his famous principle of education "In teaching *jiao* (教) there is no separation into categories" *lei* (類)" (15,39).

Confucius' disciples recalled (7,25) that his teaching consisted of four major areas: learning of tradition (文), practice of virtue (行), utmost sincerity in what one does (忠), and faithfulness in one's words to others (信). In other words, teaching for Confucius not only included formal education but the practice of virtue in actual life. Therefore, teaching should be provided not only in a school setting, but more so through the political area. In fact, teaching or education in the *Analects* mostly appears in connection with politics:

"Raise the good and instruct (*jiao*) those who are backward and they will be imbued with enthusiasm."
(2,20)

"After a good man has trained (*jiao*) the common people for seven years, they should be ready to take up arms." (13,29)

To send the common people to war without training (*jiao*) is to throw them away." (13,30)

"To impose the death penalty without first attempting to teach (*jiao*) is to be cruel."(20,2)

The above quotations describe how a political leader should teach people in ordinary working situations, military affairs and legal matters. Here politicians who practice what is right are the most effective educators.

From the point of a teacher or a prince, the way *tao* (道) is the object of teaching (教), and it is the object of learning (學) from the point of a student or the people. The concept of learning in the *Analects* also encompasses both intellectual and moral practices and is regarded as the only path to become a noble person. 'One who is eager to learn' (好學者) is another name for the noble person in the *Analects*. The *tao* in the *Analects*, however, is not the way of Heaven but the way to become a mature human person (君子 or 聖人) by the perfection of virtue.

It is noteworthy that the editors of the *Analects* placed the following statement of Confucius as the concluding verse: "A man has no way of becoming a noble person unless he understands Destiny" (20,3). Destiny, *Ming* (命) is the decree of Heaven³ which Confucius himself came to understand at the age of fifty (2,4). This was a turning point in his life. He became so much attuned to the way that he could follow his heart's desire without overstepping the norm.

Moreover, Confucius remarked that success or failure of the way (*Analects* 4,5 and 8 etc.) is ultimately dependent upon Heaven's decree: "It is Destiny if the Way prevails; it is equally Destiny if the Way falls into disuse": (14,36; Lau, p. 130). The way here is not just a path to personal perfection but the moral rule that can provide peace to the whole society. Inner cultivation (修己), the core of Confucius' teaching, always aimed at giving peace to others (安人) and to the whole people (安百姓). This whole process, however, is based on and dependent upon the decree of Heaven. In other words, the way that Confucius taught is not simply the way of Ancestors, nor the way of dealing with ancestral sacrifices and burial customs.

It is rather the cultivating of moral self and thereby building a peaceful society for people. The decree of Heaven is the source and norm of morality (7,23; 3,13; 6,28; 9,12; 14,35) and the agent conferring the sense of mission (3,24; 7,23; 9,5).

It is clear that religion as a push toward ultimacy resides at the very center of life in the thought of Confucius. In fact, it is this religious core that protects Confucianism from formalism, from degenerating into ancestral rules of etiquette and socio-political justification.

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and exists in everything in the universe.*

The place of religion can also be found in the following major thinkers of the Warring States period. Mencius, who stated, "The sages are those who attained first the same morality that is in our heart" (6A,7), concluded that human nature is good because it is endowed from Heaven (6A,16). Perfecting one's nature, therefore, is the only way for the human to come to know Heaven (7A,1). For Mencius religion can be exercised only in the midst of moral cultivations in life.

Xunzi was even more emphatic in defining the *tao*, "the way by which human beings should walk" (chap.8) He also recognized that it is only through constant learning and practice that we can become sages by making our emotions rest peacefully in propriety rites (chap.2 & 19). For Xunzi religion resides in the final stage of human perfection when a person participates in the transforming works of Heaven and Earth (參於天地).

For Mozi it was the Will of Heaven (天志) that functioned as the ultimate norm for all human activities. By defining the Will of Heaven as the universal love without any gradation or differentiation, he was asking that this universal love be applied directly to government policies and reach down to the people. There is no doubt that in Mo Tzu's teaching, religion occupied a central place, granted that this emphasis had a political purpose.

For Laozi and Zhuangzi the Way of Heaven became the direct norm for the Way of Human, but it happened only after they had thoroughly reinterpreted the Way of Heaven in an impersonal and non-active way. In spite of their negative expressions of non-self, non-achievement and no-name of the sage

or the spiritual person, it is clear that religion resides in the very center of life because of the *tao*, the ultimate penetrates and exists in everything in the universe.

II. The Basic Structure of Chinese Religious Tradition

Whether the family was affiliated with Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, folk religion or religions which came later, such as Islam and Christianity, the *Analects* of Confucius was a basic textbook for the early cultural education of Chinese youth from the Han to the beginning of the twentieth century. Memorizing the sayings of Confucius from early childhood affected one's outlook toward life, including the concept of destiny or decree of Heaven. The world view of Confucius, however, was not preserved in its pristine clarity, but rather it was interpreted by later commentators and other world views such as Buddhism and Taoism etc. Therefore, while preserving the insights that we gained from the analysis of the *Analects*, we will widen our scope to Chinese tradition as a whole, especially those that deal with ultimacy. I will now discuss the five elements that constitute the basic structure of Chinese religious tradition,⁴

1. The Primacy of Inner-Cultivation

The concern for inner cultivation has occupied the primary position in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Each teaching had its technical terms for it: Confucian tradition called it "cultivation of self" (修己 or 修身), "Being careful when one is alone" (慎獨), or "abiding in reverence" (居敬). Even though there has been a slight difference in emphasis, cultivation of self has always been regarded as the core and foundation (本) of Confucian learning or teaching. Taoist tradition called it "non-action" (無爲), "fasting of heart" (心齋), or "keeping the One" (守一). Both true knowledge and human nature can be attained through the emptying of heart/mind, although the method to achieve this may vary greatly--from forgetful meditation to drinking elixir and accumulating good deeds. The Buddhist tradition called it "cultivation of meditation" (修禪), "recitation of the Buddha" (念佛), or "no mind" (無心).

Buddhism has been most radical in its non-allowance of individuality.

For Confucianism *te* (德), moral power which is given to everyone from Heaven, is the basis for inner-cultivation. This notion of moral power was developed in the theory of human nature with the four moral beginnings (四端) by Mencius. Xunzi identified it as that moral sense (知) which can discern good and evil. For Taoism it is the very immanence of the *tao* (道) in human beings as well as in all that exists and is the basis for the practice of letting go. For Buddhism it is recognition of Buddha nature (佛性) in every human person which makes it possible for everyone to attain the perfect state of suchness (真如). In other words, even though each tradition has different presuppositions as well as methods of inner-cultivation, becoming a sage, a true person, or a Buddha is the primary goal. Moreover, the attainment of the goal is possible because every human being is endowed with the principle of Heaven, the Tao, or Buddha nature.

In the folk religious tradition the personal goal is not so noble. The ordinary folk come to pray in the temples for their own well-being and/or that of family members. Well-being (平安) means that one is keeping right order or relationships with other people, ancestors, natural powers, and Heaven. People are always concerned with the spiritual power (靈 , *ling*) of the deity to preserve and restore well-being.

2. The Social Ideal for Peace

If inner cultivation is the primary concern of Chinese religious tradition, the social ideal to form a peaceful society and world constitutes its final goal. Confucianism called it "giving peace to people" (安百姓), "pacifying the world" (平天下), or "governing the others" (治人). Confucian tradition understood that moral power attained by self-cultivation should be applied to the political ordering of society. Taoism called it "natural governance" (自然) or "transformation" (造化). Taoist political theory was practised in China only for a short time, but it has treasured a social vision where the entire people can enjoy freedom and equality. In fact, the famous image of "the Great Unity" (大同) is a Taoist-inspired idea which was incorporated into Confucian tradition in the syncretic milieu of

the early Han.

Even though Confucian scholars always criticized Buddhism for the monks' withdrawal from the world, judging it an escape from social responsibility, the Buddhist ideal of the Bodhisattva had a wide social impact in its concern for the poor, for travelers, for local repair works, etc. But because its primary concern was the deliverance of all beings from suffering, Chinese Buddhism did not develop its own political theory. Buddhism supported the integration of society but this was subsidiary to its main goal.

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While Confucianism espoused an orderly society with class distinctions, Taoism and Buddhism envisioned a society where great peace, compassion and equality prevailed. The Confucian social vision has constituted the backbone of Chinese society but the Taoist and Buddhist visions have at times offered the Confucian tradition a challenge and have been incorporated into it. The difference in the social visions of the three teachings originated from their basic understanding of human nature and the ultimate concern. In Confucianism every individual as a moral subject is responsible for learning. In Taoism the *tao* negates all distinctions and differences in human attainment seeing them a hindrance to true growth and the natural harmony of society. Buddhism also relativizes good and evil, beauty and ugliness, and all human cultural achievement. To a great extent people's basic vision of ultimate values, which we call religion, determines the character of their social vision.

Folk religious tradition did not develop an independent political vision, though sometimes it cooperated with Taoist or Buddhist uprisings. The social concern of folk religion, however, had a strong impact on the integration of the village community. The religious symbol of the village community and its identity within the total hierarchy can easily be seen in local temples and their deities. The social goal was to maintain peace

and order. They were, therefore, not far from the Confucian vision. Confucianism, however, offered more dynamism because of its emphasis on learning which could effect social change.

3. Heaven as the Source of Morality

We have seen that self-cultivation and a social ideal formed the primary and central concerns of Chinese religious tradition. Life after death and deliverance from the temporary suffering of the world were never major issues. Even the Taoist pursuit of immortality was not the negation of this present life; it was the prolonging and perfecting of this life by overcoming the corruptible nature of the body. Since both self-cultivation and a social ideal contain a strong moral character, it is important to know where morality originated and what constitutes its ultimate norm.

Confucianism called the ultimate source of morality, Heaven (天), the Great Ultimate (太極), the Non-Ultimate (無極), or the Principle (理). Though Confucian tradition tended to impersonalize this ultimate being as the principle, it never forgot or negated the fact that the moral nature of humans is endowed from Heaven. Consequently, Heaven always remains the final witness of one's moral integrity. Later Confucians still called on Heaven in their *personal* adversity, in their informal writing, poems, letters, while their theoretical works are almost completely concerned with the impersonal principle.

Taoism called it Tao (道), the Great One (太一), the Primal Heavenly Honorable (元始天尊). The Taoist tradition also manifested tension between philosophically-oriented intellectuals and more popular practitioners of religion. The former tended to impersonalize the ultimate as the invisible transcendent Tao which is both the source of life and the principle which is immanent in every being. The latter, however, made either a statue of a human form or a tablet of the four characters of the Jade Emperor and venerated it at the highest shrine of the temple. There was an accompanying strong belief that all morally good and bad behavior would be reported to the Jade Emperor, the final judge of human life.⁵

Buddhism is unique in that it does not presuppose any ultimate Being as the source of life and morality. Therefore, it is

interesting to see how the Chinese original belief in Heaven changed in Chinese Buddhism. Heaven or the Emperor on High (上帝) becomes only one of the heavenly devas (梵天 or 帝釋) in the process of samsara, i.e, transmigration. This reinterpretation, however, was not adopted by the Chinese as a whole. In popular thought Heaven still held the highest position, while Buddha and Laozi became consultants to the Emperor on High.⁶

4. Ancestors and Other Deities as the Mediums of Moral Tradition

The numinous world of China is not monotheistic but hierarchical in the sense that there is one highest Lord (上帝) which is called Heaven, and the hundred deities (百神). The son of Heaven, who should fulfill the decree of Heaven by his virtuous rule, has a duty to console the hundred deities by offering sacrifices in accord with a hundred rites (百禮). Theoretically the hundred deities include all the deities except Heaven; they include the natural deities such as sun, moon, stars, earth, river, etc. and ancestors and other ghosts (人鬼). The natural deities perform a moral function in that if the king does not rule people properly, there arise natural calamities to warn him and the nation as a whole.

Among the hundred deities it was ancestors who occupied the most prominent position. Ancestors were an integral part of the Chinese family without any differentiation for their religious affiliation. From the funeral rites to seasonal sacrifices and the family admonition book, ancestors were valued mainly because of their moral influence and fulfilled the human need for visible models to follow and emulate.

Taoism considered the hundred deities as the hierarchical ministers (司命神) of the Lord on High who brought the heavenly commands to this world and reported back every human action, seen or unseen. Therefore, one must be careful even in a dark room, for these deities can search the very hearts of people.

Buddhism accepted most of the Chinese beliefs in the minor deities, but considered them as low forms of faith for the populace. In folk Buddhism both Bodhisattvas and Chinese deities are given great devotion. The systematized conception of the

Buddhist heavens and hells has stimulated the Taoists to form their own hierarchy of deities who govern the heavens and hells.

5. The Rites and Divination Practices

Unlike Christian worship and liturgies which are centered around God, the Chinese rituals are not usually directed to the highest deity. The Chinese see the effective decree of Heaven as being more in the heart of persons than in external rites. Rituals are directed at the hundred deities because they are considered the most effective mediums for expressing respect and petitions. In both frequency and solemnity ancestors have always held a central place in religious rituals. However, we must keep in mind that the total structure of Chinese ritual symbol is hierarchical. In other words, the ordinary family is simply to offer ancestral rites at proper times. But this is only a part of and in fact the bottom of the symbol system whose structure is revealed fully only when we consider the parallel levels of social status and ritual practices.

In order to illustrate this I will explain the oldest and most important sacrifice *Di* (上帝), periodically offered in the central chamber (太廟) of the royal ancestor shrine. The earliest record we have concerning *Di* sacrifice is in the *Analects* 3,10-11. "Someone asked about the *Di* sacrifice. The Master said, 'It is not something I understand, for whoever understands it will be able to manage the Empire as easily as if he had it here,' pointing to his palm." Commentators tell us that the state of Lu offered this sacrifice every five years at the shrine of the first ancestor, the Duke of Chou. This sacrifice was offered to Heaven and to the founder of the dynasty. By this the whole country was recognizing the origin of life that flows from Heaven to the first ancestor and then to his descendants. The *Di* sacrifice developed into the *Jiao* sacrifice (郊祭), which constituted a visible rite to Heaven and to the hundred deities. The performance of this rite was reserved as the right of the Son of Heaven.

We should observe that both the *Di* and *Jiao* sacrifice possessed a complex structure which manifested the whole hierarchy of the numious world. This pyramid pattern of rituals fitted in well with the Confucian social image and also with state ritual practices of traditional China.

The Taoist ritual *Jiao* (醮) includes the hierarchy of deities from the Lord on High to the stars and other natural deities. Since this sacrifice was performed periodically by the Taoist priests (not by the king) for the restoration of well-being of the whole village, it symbolized a more democratic social vision. If the image representing the *Di* sacrifice were a pyramid, the image of Taoistic *Jiao* sacrifice would be a concentric circle.

The divination practices in China took a path similar to other religious rituals. In the beginning they were the most powerful mediums to find out the will of the deities, and the right of interpretation was reserved only to the King. Gradually, the human element played a greater part and the divinization practices were finally stabilized in the Book of Changes. Divination either in its symbolic forms or in the popular practices of folk religion, has been closely tied to the life of individuals and the community as a whole.

One difference in symbolic value between rituals and divination is that rituals stand for what is constant, while divination is used at a time of ambiguity and uncertainty. Since life includes both, rituals and divination were usually combined with the practice of divining the best time for the performances of rituals. And moral concern, which characterizes the Chinese conception of the ultimate has tried to encompass both ambiguity and uncertainty in the practical ideal of the timely mean (時中).

Conclusion

We began our discussion with the fact that the term *zongjiao* (宗教) carries a Western connotation of religion which brings out either a negative reaction or a tendency to relegate it to a marginalized zone of Chinese tradition. I am not proposing to change this term into another one. As I mentioned before, the literal meaning of *zongjiao* as "the primary teaching" is acceptable. Moreover, this term has one hundred years of history and by now is firmly established in the ordinary vocabulary. What I am suggesting is our need to enlarge our concept of religion in the light of the Chinese vision of the ultimate which to a large extent is the East-Asian reality.

When we enlarge our concept of religion to encompass human life as a whole, with its ultimate reference, value, or

concern, we do not look for religion only in folk tradition or in marginalized areas of Chinese culture. A historian of religion who wants to teach or write on Chinese religion should have a balanced understanding of Chinese tradition as a whole, including both the intellectual and popular traditions and their interpenetration. Whether one approaches this subject periodically or thematically the historians should introduce their world view, its development, and practices and how all these were interrelated and evaluated by the ultimate reference in their own culture and period.

Notes

1. "The Major Trends of the Intellectual History of China" (論中國學術思想變遷之大勢) general introduction, p.7. His books have been translated into both Japanese and Korean as well as into English. As for the study of his thought in English, refer to Joseph Levenson, *Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China*, Harvard University Press, 1953 and Chang Hao, *Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and Intellectual Transition in China, 1890-1907*, Harvard University Press, 1971.
2. (牟宗三, 「中國哲學的特質」) Chapters 6, 12, etc.
3. All the traditional commentators understand *Ming* in this verse as a silent command of Heaven with moral connotations. No one took it as impersonal fate or natural law.
4. Originally I presented this in the annual conference of the Korean Association of the History of Religion on Dec. 10, 1983. This is published in an article form (in Korean) in *The Studies on Religion* (宗教研究) 2, 1985, pp. 38-72. I use some part of this article here, but the whole approach and focus has changed.
5. Treatise on Response and Retribution (太上感應篇 12th Cent.), may be the typical source which illustrates the popular belief on Heaven and other deities, i.e. the ministers of Heaven.
6. *The History of South Dynasty* (南史) 14 and *The Records on Sung* (宋書) 79.