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CHINESE RELIGIONS

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A generic term often used to indicate the various religious traditions that emerged in China over its long history. There are four basic categories of Chinese religions: (1) CONFUCIANISM,* (2) DAOISM,* (3) BUDDHISM* and (4) Chinese folk religions. Throughout China's history, these religious traditions have interacted with, shaped and transformed each other. The boundaries of these religious traditions have remained fluid, with a significant amount of mutual interaction and sharing of common elements. In their later developed form, Neo-Confucianism and Neo-Daoism resembled each other to the extent that it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. The traditional Chinese term *sanjiao* ("Three Ways") best exemplifies this complex interaction. *Sanjiao* refers to the three Chinese great religious traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. A person can practice any one or more, or even all three religious traditions simultaneously, according to the specific needs in the course of one's life. One could be a Confucian in public life, a Taoist adept searching for immortality, and offering sacrifices to local deities for good fortune.

Neolithic Origins. The earliest Chinese settlements emerged during the Neolithic period (circa 5,000 B.C.) and the Bronze Age (circa 3,000 B.C.). No unified Chinese civilization existed during these two periods, merely pockets of Chinese settlements known as Yangshao Culture, Dawenko Culture, Liangche Culture, Hungshan Culture, Longshan Culture and Erligang Culture, named after their archaeological sites. Archaeological excavations have uncovered burial sites with graves arranged hierarchically. Remains of graveside ritual offerings of food and drink and pig skulls were unearthed at some sites, while primitive amulets and statues were found at others. These discoveries point to rudimentary forms of ancestor veneration in ancient Chinese religious practice.

Shang Dynasty (circa 1751-1045 B.C.). The period of the Shang dynasty witnessed the emergence of a distinct class of shamans tasked with oracle bone divination (*jiagu*). These shamans inscribed questions to the spirits on pieces of tortoise or oxen bones using the earliest extant form of the Chinese script. These questions were phrased in a way that could be answered by a "yes" (i.e., auspicious) or "no" (i.e., inauspicious). The two possible answers were also inscribed, and the bones heated to induce splitting. The split-line nearest the word "auspicious" or "inauspicious" was taken as the answer. Although some of the questions were addressed to either the supreme deity *Shangdi* (the Most High Lord) or other lesser deities of the wind and grain, celestial bodies, mountains and rivers, the majority of the questions were directed at the ancestors of the Shang ruling family. Other evidence indicates that the Shang ruling house also offered sacrifices to their ancestors and to *Shangdi*. Taken together, the oracle bones and ancestral sacrifices indicate the emergence of a state-sanctioned religious framework that was built upon ancestral veneration. Scholars think that the concept of *Shangdi* originated as a deified primeval ancestor spirit or spirits.

Zhou Dynasty (1045-249 B.C.). The Zhou dynasty introduced the cult of sacrifices to *Tian* ("Heaven"). Researchers remain uncertain whether *Tian* was an anthropomorphic or impersonal entity. Scholars who argue for the anthropomorphic origin of *Tian* have pointed to the fact that

etymologically, the ideography for *Tian* is a person with outstretched arms and wearing a hat, perhaps evocative of a deified primordial ancestral guardian protecting the ruling house. During this period, large scale ancestral veneration rituals evolved and took root.

The “Three Ways” (*Sanjiao*). Major developments took place during the tumultuous period of the Hundred Schools (*Bai jia*), straddling the latter part of the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 B.C.), the twilight years of the Zhou dynasty, and the Warring States period (481-221 B.C.), when Zhou rule collapsed and feudal states vied for power. This was a period of terrible suffering for the ordinaryfolk caught in the crossfire of marauding armies. The old cultural-religious order had collapsed and created a spiritual vacuum. Philosophers and scholars from rival schools offered competing solutions to the existential questions on human suffering and social disorder. Promoters of the two emerging traditions of CONFUCIANISM* and DAOISM* battled one another and with other rivals such as the Legalists, Mohists, and the Naturalists. During this chaotic period, the Daoist classic *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*) was written. The two eventual victors, Daoism and Confucianism would face a third religious force, BUDDHISM* that arrived on Chinese soil in the 2nd century A.D.

Chinese Folk Religions. The popular level witnessed the gradual evolution of vibrant Chinese folk religious traditions that combine elements from the three great religious traditions. A defining characteristic of all Chinese folk religious traditions is its large pantheon of provincial, city and clannic deities, ancestral spirits and ghosts, presided over by the Jade Emperor (*Yuhuang*). Some of the more popular folk religious traditions include the cult of the Kitchen God (who makes an annual report to the Jade Emperor on the behavior and conduct of the family), the ubiquitous cult of the Earth God (*Tudigong*) who protects households from wandering malevolent ghosts, and the cult of the City God (*Chenghuang*) who guards the city and escorts departed souls to the subterranean netherworld realm of the Yellow Springs. Deities are sometimes adopted from the great religions, e.g., the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara becoming the “goddess of mercy” *Guanyin* in Chinese folk religious tradition. Devotees offer prayers, incense, sacrifices and other rituals, in return for favors, good fortune, divination, as well as protection from malevolent or hungry ghosts.

Central to the Chinese folk religious traditions is the annual cycle of religious feasts that combines elements from popular customs, Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Highlights of this cyclical calendar include the Spring Festival or Lunar New Year (first day of the first moon), the Feast of the Earth God (second day of the second moon), the birth of the goddess of mercy, *Guanyin* (19th day of the second moon), the day of “sweeping the ancestral graves,” *Qingming* (105 days after winter solstice), the birth of Sakyamuni Buddha or *Vesak* day (eighth day of the fourth moon), the Festival of the Dragon Boats and Dumplings (fifth day of the fifth moon), the hungry ghosts’ month (seventh moon), the Festival of the Two Lovers – the Cowherd and Weaving Maid (seventh day of the seventh moon), the Mid-autumn Festival or the Festival of the Moon (15th day of the eighth moon), the Winter Solstice, and the Feast of the Ascension of the Kitchen God to Heaven (a week before the Spring Festival).

See also: CONFUCIANISM; DAOISM and LAOZI (LAO-TZU).

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