CHAPTER EIGHT: CHINESE RELIGIONS

Chapter Outline and Unit Summaries

I. Introduction

A. China’s Polyvalent Religious Sensibility: One’s Religious Commitment is Both / And not Either / Or

B. The Impact of Chinese Communism on the Study and Practice of Religion in China

C. General Categories

1. Polytheism and Ancestor Worship from Before Recorded History to the Eleventh Century B.C.E. Shang Dynasty

2. The Emergence of Awareness of a Supreme High God from the Development of the Eleventh Century B.C.E. Chou Dynasty to the Beginning of the Common Era


4. An Eclectic Mixture Synthesizing Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism for Most Chinese from Eleventh Century C.E. to the Present

II. Basic Chinese Religious Concepts

A. Recognition of Multiple Gods and Spirits

1. Polytheism and Animism Dominate Early Chinese Religion

2. The Gods of Heaven and Earth Special Focus of Worship

3. Local Deities and Spirits Worshipped

   a. The Shen: Beneficial Spirits of Light Places
   b. The Kuei: Evil Spirits of Dark Places
   c. Animals, Grain, and Sometimes Humans, Sacrificed


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B. *Yin* and *Yang*

1. Ancient Chinese Philosophy Explained Order of Universe as a Balance between Two Forces: *Yin* and *Yang*
   
a. The *Yin*: Dark, Negative, Female, Cool, Damp, Earth, Moon, Shadows
   b. The *Yang*: Light, Positive, Male, Warm, Dry, Sun

2. All Things (Except Sun and Earth) are Combination of the Two Primal Forces

3. Happiness Results when *Yin* and *Yang* in Harmony

C. Filial Piety and Ancestor Worship

1. Elder Object of Special Respect in Chinese Culture

2. Veneration and Ancestor Worship
   
a. Belief in the Value of Home and Family
   b. To Forget Ancestors Brings Disgrace
   c. Dead Ancestors in Position to Help Family through Contact with Spirit World
   d. Sacrificial Offerings to Ancestors Essential

D. Divination

1. Order of Universe Allows Humans to Predict Future Events

2. Ancient Chinese South the Future in the Patterns of the Tortoise Shell and/or Stalks of Grain

3. The *I Ching* (Book of Changes) Contains Sixty Hexagram Patterns Used to Interpret Meaning of Coins or Stalks of Plants Cast Randomly

E. Development of Belief in the Shang Ti

1. Chou Clans Overthrow Shang Dynasty, 11th Century B.C.E.

2. Chou Dynasty Asserts Right to Rule Based on Morality and Religion

3. Chou Dynasty Teaches Existence of One High God Named Shang Ti
a. Shang Ti Judges Good and Evil, Particularly Among Rulers; Deposed Shang Dynasty Because of its Immorality  
b. Shang Ti Prefers Righteousness to Sacrifice  
c. The *Shu Ching* Records Shang Ti’s Morality  
d. Chinese Rulers Develop Something Like Hebrew Ethical Monotheism  

F. Decline of the Feudal System  

1. Chou Dynasty Organizes Economic, Political, Social Life According Highly Stratified Feudal Hierarchy  

2. Breakdown of Chou Feudal System Between Eighth and third Centuries B.C.E. Gives Rise to Warlords, Merchant Class, and General Overturn of Old Aristocratic Structure  

3. Great Chinese Schools of Philosophical-Religious Thought Emerge to Deal with the Social Chaos of the Declining Feudal System  

III. Taoism  

A. The Life of Lao-tzu  

1. Lao-tzu (Literally Means “Old Man / Old Boy”; Real Name of Founder is Li-poh-yang) Lives in Sixth Century B.C.E.  

2. Possibly a Bureaucrat in Declining Chou Dynasty  

3. Legend: Attempts to Flee China, Compelled to Write Down His Wisdom by Border-Guard; Produces *Tao Tê Ching*  

B. The *Tao Tê Ching*  

1. Second Only to *Analects of Confucius* for Influence in Chinese Literature  

2. Literal Title: “The Classic of the Way and Its Power or Virtue”  

3. Contains 5,000 words, 80 Chapters  

4. Translated More than Any Book in World Other than Bible
5. *Tao Tê Ching* Was Likely Composed Over Several Centuries and Reached Final Form in Fourth Century B.C.E.

6. Main Theme: All Human Achievements are Folly, Especially Elaborate Government

C. Teachings of the Early Taoist Philosophers

1. Chaung-tzu (Fourth Century B.C.E.) Collects Taoist Materials from Early Taoists for Converting Chinese from Confucianism

2. Core Teachings of Early Taoists

   a. Basic Unity Behind the Universe is a Mysterious and Undefinable Force Called the *Tao*, The Way
      (1) *Tao* is Fundamental, Impersonal Force
      (2) *Tao* is Like an Inexorable River
      (3) Goal of Life: Live Simply and Seek only to be in Harmony with and Understand the *Tao*

   b. Life is the Greatest of All Possessions
      (1) All Else is Subject to Decay
      (2) Prolonging and Enriching Life, Even by Magic, Becomes a *Taoist* Value

   c. Life is to be Lived Simply
      (1) Question the Value of Civilization, Wealth, Power, Family Ties, Conventional Morality
      (2) Innocence and Detachment as Ideals
      (3) Minimal Government is the Ideal
      (4) Small Village the Social Ideal
      (5) Taoists Tend toward Pacifism Because War Useless and Wasteful
      (6) Infant’s Simplicity is the Ideal

   d. Pomp and Glory are to be Despised
      (1) Pomp and Prestige the Roots of Social Evil
      (2) Pride and Self-Superiority are Destructive
      (3) Chuang-tzu Refuses Prime Minister Post

   e. Non-Theistic Philosophy
      (1) The *Tao Tê Ching* Makes Little Mention of Gods or Heaven
      (2) One Neither Prays nor Sacrifices to *Tao*
      (3) No View of Afterlife for Individuals
D. Schools that Rivaled the Early Taoists

1. Chaos of Decline in Chou Dynasty Breeds Many Philosophies, but all Share Common Trait: All Claim to Know the “art of governing” in Difficult Times

2. The Confucians
   a. Advocate Renewed Feudal System
   b. Advocate Importance of Ritual for Uniting People
   c. Best Societies are the Most Structured Ones

3. The Legalists / Realists
   a. Strong Leadership the Cure for China’s Ills
   b. Human Nature is Wicked and Tends to Laziness
   c. Government Should be Without Pity or Morality, Rule for the Majority Irrespective of Other Values
   d. Religion of Any Kind is Useless

4. The Mohists
   a. Disciples of Mo-tzu (circa 468-390 B.C.E.)
   b. Government Ought to Operate According to Precepts of Traditional Religion
   c. Pacifist, but Self-Defense is Warranted

E. Later Development of Taoism

a. Taoism Moves Elites to being Religion of Masses
b. Two Types of Taoism Develop
   (1) Adherents to Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu
   (2) Long Healthy Life / Immortality Taoism
      (a) Dietary Practices to Extend Life
      (b) Taoist Alchemy Seeks to Extend Life with Various Kinds of Magic
      (c) The Stove God: Tsao Ch_n
   c. By Second Century C.E. Tao Tê Ching Recognized as Chinese Classic
d. Charismatic Taoist Leaders Organize the Taoist Movement, Introduce Faith Healing, Morality, Temples, Priests, Rituals, etc.
e. Majority Religion by Third Century C.E.
f. Presence of Mahayana Buddhism in Fourth and Fifth Century China Causes Conflict with Taoists
g. Buddhist – Taoist Syncretism Gradually Occurs
IV. Confucianism

A. Confucianism: Deeply Chinese Movement but Not a Religion in the Ordinary Sense

1. No Priesthood
2. No Afterlife
3. No Revealed Scriptures
4. No Ascetic or Monastic Tradition

B. The Life of Confucius

1. K’ung Fu-tzu: The Master (551 - 479 B.C.E.)
2. Writings Compiled Seventy Years After Death in Analects of Confucius
3. Sketch of Biographical Details
   a. Son of Elderly Warrior
   b. Raised in Poverty by Widowed Mother
   c. Educated in Standard Chinese Subjects
   d. Married and Divorced, One Son
   e. Worked as Government Bureaucrat
   f. Becomes Respected Teacher of Young People
   g. Specialized in Principles of Good Government, History, and Divination (edited I Ching)

C. The Teachings of Confucius

1. General Perspective Somewhere Between Agnostic and Atheistic, Pro-Religion and Anti-Religion
   a. There is No God or Gods, but Religious Rituals Useful for Uniting People
b. Religious Practices Should Not Interfere with Social Obligations  
c. Ethics, Good Government, and Personal-Social Goals Primary Over Religious Practice / Beliefs

2. The Principle of *Li*

   a. Translated Variously as “Propriety,” “Rites,” “Ceremonies,” “Courtesy”  
   b. General Meanings  
      1. The Course of Life as It was Intended to Go  
      2. Everything is in Its Right Place  
      3. All Running Smoothly According to Rank and Hierarchy  
   c. Ideal was Orderly Feudal-Aristocratic Society

3. The Five Basic Relationships in Life that Require the Presence of *Li* for Healthy Social Order

   a. Father to Son  
   b. Elder Brother to Younger Brother  
   c. Husband to Wife  
   d. Elder to Junior  
   e. Ruler to Subject

4. The *Jen*: The Inward Attitude of *Li* Behavior

   a. Translated Variously as “Love,” “Goodness,” Human-heartedness”  
   b. Allow Should Strive for this Inner Quality  
   c. Attitude of *Shu*, Reciprocity: Do Not Do to Others What You Would Not Want Them to Do to You

5. The Natural Goodness of Humankind

   a. Confucius’ Disciple Mencius Teaches Natural Goodness and Perfectibility of Humankind  
   b. Contrast with Christianity and “Original Sin”  
   c. Good Government Can Help People be Good, and Bad Government Makes People Evil  
   d. Rewards-Punishments, Now or in Afterlife, Unnecessary to Compel Morality—People Will be Good for Its Own Sake
D. The Development of Confucianism

1. Reasons for Early Failures of Confucianism
   a. Opposition from Rival Religious Schools Vying for the Attention of the Ruling Elite
   b. Advocate Feudal Ideal in Social-Political Context in which Feudalism is on the Decline

2. Mencius Develops Confucianism
   a. Mencius (372-289 B.C.E.) Orthodox Sage
   b. The Book of Mencius Teaches Natural Goodness of Humans While Ignoring Traditional Religious Ideas
   c. Given Proper Environment, People Can be Good
   d. Proper Environment is Government Based on Paternalistic Feudalism
   e. Mencius Opposed War, Supports Just Revolution

3. Hsün Tz_ Reinterprets Confucius, Wins More Converts
   a. Hsün Tz_ (298-238 B.C.E.) Heterodox Sage
   b. Emphasizes More than Confucius the Value of Rituals as Means of Education and Unity
   c. Denies the Basic Goodness of Humankind
   d. Heavenly Spirits are Impersonal Forces

4. Rise of Han Dynasty Brings Stability and Jobs for Confucian Intellectuals
   a. 136 B.C.E. Han Rulers Place Confucians in Charge of the Education of Chinese Youth
   b. Civil Service Exams Based on Confucian Theory
   c. Confucian Education System Lasts Until 1905 C.E.

5. Cult of Confucius Grows During Han Dynasty
   a. 195 B.C.E. Han Emperor Visits Confucius’ Grave and Offers Sacrifices
   b. 145 B.C.E. Temple Built to Honor Confucius
   c. 8 B.C.E. Titles and Land Given to Descendants
   d. By Sixth Century C.E. Every Prefecture in China had Temple to Confucius
   e. Some Considered Confucius a God, Many Considered Him Patron Saint of Scholars
   f. Reforms of 1503 C.E. Minimize Cult
V. Traditional Chinese Holidays

A. Chinese New Year
   1. End of January, Early February
   2. Emphasis on Cleansing and Renewal
   3. On the Eve Families Worship Gods, Venerate Ancestors

B. Pure and Bright Festival
   1. Early April
   2. Celebrates Renewal of Yang Forces in Nature
   3. Graves of Ancestors Cleaned, Redecorated

C. The Dragon Boat Festival
   1. June
   2. Celebrates Beginning of Summer
   3. High Point of Yang Power and Beginning of Yin Power
   4. Taoists Exorcise Pestilent Spirits

D. All Soul’s Day
   1. Late August
   2. Chinese Version of Buddhist Ullambana, Combining Idea of Purgatory with Traditional Concern for Ancestors
   3. Offerings Made to Release Souls in Kind of Amnesty from the World of the Dead

E. Autumn Harvest Festival
   1. Full Moon of September
   2. Eat Fresh Fruits and Sweet Pastries Called Moon Cakes
   3. Read Poetry, Give Thanks for Harvest
F. Winter Holidays

1. Taoist Holiday of Renewal in the Universe (Chiao) on the Winter Solstice

2. Celebrations of Various Heroes, Gods, Goddesses, Saints

VI. Taoism and Confucianism Today

A. The Communist Revolution of 1949 Dramatically Changes Religious Practice in China

1. Maoists View Religion as Vestige of Feudal Past

2. Taoism and Confucianism Under Great Suspicion as Superstitious and Feudalist

3. Buddhism Under Suspicion as Foreign Import

4. Christianity Suspect Due to its Ties to Imperial West

5. Islam Not Suppressed to Appease Many Ethnic Minorities

6. The Cultural Revolution, August 1966-1969

B. Post-Maoist China Warms Somewhat to Religious Practice

1. Many Churches and Temples Reopen in 1977

2. Government Supports Religious Studies in Universities

3. Chinese Government Pays to Translate Bible

4. Government Puts Strict Regulations on Religions

5. Chinese Marxist Attempts to Build a Non-Religious Society Failing, as Did Similar Attempts in Soviet Union and Eastern Europe

Key Names, Concepts, and Terms

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