

Chinese Religions and Philosophies

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Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are considered the “three pillars” of ancient Chinese society. As philosophies and religions, they not only influenced spirituality, but also government, science, the arts, and social structure. Though their specific beliefs and teachings have occasionally been at odds with each other, there has been much room for overlap. Instead of one tradition taking over and pushing the others out, the three philosophies have influenced society alongside each other, changed each other, and at times blended together. Understanding the unique interplay between these three traditions gives great insight into ancient Chinese society, as well as modern times.

Confucianism

Though closer to a philosophy than a true religion, Confucianism was a way of life for ancient Chinese people, and it continues to influence Chinese culture today. The founder of Confucianism, named Confucius, lived from 551 to 479 B.C.E. He was a philosopher and political figure who lived during a time when traditional Chinese principles began to deteriorate under competing political states. He took older religious precepts and translated them into guidelines for social mores. His teachings gave guidance on all levels of ancient Chinese life, from interactions between family members and in the public sphere, to educational standards and how states should be governed. Confucius saw every aspect of life as being made up of obligations between people and entities, and rituals to convey the mutual dependency between them. His teachings focused on humanism, including treating others the way you would want to be treated. He taught that if everyone fulfilled their roles and obligations with respect and kindness towards others, it would build a stronger state. While religious rituals were mentioned alongside all of the other rituals a person was expected to perform, Confucius did not focus on spiritual concerns like the afterlife, gods and goddesses, or mysticism. This is why Confucianism is considered a philosophy rather than a religion, even though it is often lumped in with other major religions.

Confucianism became the dominant political philosophy during the Han Dynasty from 206 B.C.E. to 220 C.E. Because Confucian teachings were conservative and told people to maintain their role in social order, the philosophy was used by the state to keep the status quo from that time forward. The structure of Chinese society and its focus on rituals, familial respect and obligation, worship of ancestors, and self-discipline, remains greatly influenced by Confucius and his teachings.

Taoism

Taoism (also called Daoism) is a Chinese religion that developed a bit after Confucianism, around two thousand years ago. In contrast to Confucianism, Taoism is mainly concerned with the spiritual elements of life, including the nature of the universe. The guiding principle of Taoism is roughly translated as “the Way,” which is a harmonious natural order that arises between humans and the world, and that Taoists should strive to achieve. In the Taoist structure

of the universe, humans are meant to accept and yield to the Tao and only do things that are natural and in keeping with the Tao. This is the concept of wu-wei, which translates as “non-action,” but really means to go with the true nature of the world and not strive too hard for desires. This puts Taoism in opposition to Confucianism in another way: it is not concerned about with humanistic morality, government, and society, all of which Taoists see as inventions of humans and not necessarily part of the Tao. At the same time, Taoists were interested in longevity, both of the human body and the soul. Achieving spiritual immortality through becoming one with nature is an important part of the Taoist religion.

Despite their differences, Taoist and Confucian ideas are not completely at odds with each other, so Chinese society was able to absorb concepts from both traditions. Taoism had influence on literature and the arts, but the biggest area of Taoist influence was in science. The Taoist focus on natural elements and observing how the natural world works helped to create Chinese medicine. Similar to the modern scientific method, Taoists observed how different medicines affected people and animals through experimentation. Their collective knowledge gained through trying to improve human longevity made a huge contribution to health sciences.

Buddhism

Buddhism was the third major belief system of ancient China. It was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, also called the Buddha, who lived in India around the sixth century B.C.E. Buddhism is a philosophy that focuses on personal development and attainment of deep knowledge. Buddhists seek to achieve enlightenment through meditation, spiritual learning, and practice. They believe in reincarnation and that life is impermanent and full of suffering and uncertainty; the way to find peace is through reaching nirvana, a joyful state beyond human suffering. There are many different sects that place different emphasis on various aspects of Buddhism. The two largest sects are Theravada Buddhism, which is found primarily in southern Asia, and Mahayana Buddhism, which is found in east Asia, including China.

After its founding in India, Buddhism spread to and became popular in China in the first century C.E. Part of the reason Buddhism became popular in China was because of Taoism. Some Buddhist practices were similar to Taoist ones, and Buddhist monks would use Taoist concepts to explain Buddhism to the Chinese, overcoming the cultural and language barrier between Indian and the Chinese people. Buddhism also influenced Taoism with its institutional structure, which Taoists copied and modified. A competition between Buddhism and Taoism arose to gain more followers and greater government influence, and this competition increased the vitality of both religions. As Buddhism became more prevalent, its concepts merged with Taoist and Confucian ideas to become the basis of ancient Chinese society and government. Its influence is seen in Chinese art, architecture, and literature.

Values and ideas from Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are still prevalent in Chinese culture today. Despite the differences and occasional contradictions between the three traditions, the ancient Chinese society held each of these philosophies in high importance and incorporated the different teachings into multiple areas of life.

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	Confucianism	Taoism	Buddhism
Time to emerge			
Major teachings			
Influence			

