

Chinese Religions: Evolution, Compatibility and Adaptability - A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The Chinese civilization has a long, long history and its religions too, have a history of almost 2000 years. It is interesting and worth our while to have a retrospective examination of its early development as a case study of its nature and characteristics so as to predict its future trend of development.

It is widely known that there were three major religions in imperial China; these are Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. I shall examine them one by one, tracing their formations, and whenever convenient, demonstrate each of their compatibility and adaptability and mutual influences in the process of their early development.

1. Religious Confucianism

Whether Confucianism is a religion is debatable, and most scholars are not in favour of considering it as a religion. A recent publication by Li Shen, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, has regarded Confucianism as a religion, though he admitted that many of his friends did not agree with him. The *ru* Confucianism in Indonesia is being developed into a religion and this may lead one into concluding that Confucianism was a religion. My own impression is that Confucianism was strictly and solemnly observed in imperial China and therefore it had the spirit of a religion. The modern translation of the English word religion is *zongjiao*, derived and borrowed from the Japanese translation of such a concept, and it is quite difficult to find an equivalent in the Chinese language per se. In fact, Confucianism or *rujiao* can either mean

the teaching of the *ru* or to the modern Chinese, the *ru* religion (*jiao*). While Buddhism and Daoism were always called *jiao* in Chinese, the man in the street does not bother to distinguish whether the *jiao* has a religious connotation or not. In any case, this paper tries to adopt a new term, "religious Confucianism", modelled on the distinction made between philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism.

The initial formation of *rujiao* or religious Confucianism, came much later in Confucian history, at the beginning of Western Han dynasty (206 BC - 24 AD).

Confucius has always been regarded as a great thinker or philosopher in ancient China, and his ethical and political thinking, expounded by his followers, has had extensive influence on Chinese culture. Although the *Analects* recorded that he never talked about death, ghosts and spirits,¹ I would argue that he thought about them. All this might show inclination of his religious sentiments, which could be developed into a religion.

It was from the early Han dynasty that Confucius was deified as a *jiaozhu* or religious master. Since Confucius' teachings suited the ruler's administration, rulers of different dynasties made an effort to reform or moderate them so that they might become compact and complete. After a long process, Confucius was eventually deified, and his classics regarded as canons. Later, when Daoism was formed, maybe in the wake of the spread of Buddhism into China, Confucianism absorbed some of the thoughts both from Buddhism and Daoism, became more religious, took on an ideological form, and extended its lasting influence.

¹ See Book VII "Shu'er.22" and Book XI "Xianjin.12" in Lunyu (*Analects*). These are the two occasions where Confucius' views on ghosts and spirits are recorded. See D.C. Lau (tr.) *The Analects*, 1979 p.88 and p. 107. The two passages are being translated respectively as follows:

"The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods", and "Chi-lu asked how the spirits of the dead and the gods should be served. The Master said, 'You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?' ". Based on the two passages above, I assume that such a topic was lingering in Confucius' mind and had him puzzled, though he never openly spoke on it. At least one of his students was also eager to know something about it, though nobody could provide an answer.

During the Spring and Autumn periods (776-476 BC), Confucius' teaching first inherited the views on Heaven and ancestor worship from the Zhou period (770-221 BC). The cornerstone of this thinking placed emphasis on the absolute authority of social hierarchy and advocated the graded system of blood relationship. Thus Confucianism had the potential to be developed into a religion. It was not yet a religion in Pre-Qin China, competing on an equal basis with other great schools of philosophy. The time was ripe when China was united into a great empire for the first time. During a period of evolution lasting 1000 odd years, there had been two major reformations. The first occurred during the rein of Emperor Wu of Han, when Dong Zhongsu (179-104 BC) obtained imperial support, disparaged all hundred schools and upheld Confucianism as an orthodox school. Such an act was badly needed, as the autocracy required such a religion and philosophy, ideologically matching its sentiments.

Dong Zhongsu expressed his central ideas best when he wrote of how the actions of man flowed into the universal course of Heaven and Earth and caused reciprocal reverberations in their manifestations. Since there was a close relationship between Heaven and man, the Han Confucians believed that abnormal events in the human world caused Heaven to manifest abnormal phenomena in the natural world. These abnormal phenomena were known as catastrophes and anomalies. Catastrophes represented the warnings of Heaven to errant man. Such warnings might be in the form of floods, famines, landslides or earthquakes. If man persisted in his evil ways despite these warnings, Heaven would cause strange anomalies to occur in the form of the eclipse of the Sun or the Moon, unusual movements of the stars, the growth of beards on women, or the birth of babies with two heads. If man still persisted in evil, unmindful of these signs from Heaven, then he was doomed to ruin. On the other hand, if man acted correctly, then the world system would be harmonious and well governed.²

² Dong Zhongshu is regarded the creator of religious Confucianism. Dong held Confucius in high esteem and advocated to disparage the hundred schools. Dong was particularly interested in education and he set up many local schools. He emphasized the selection of talented, filial and worthy persons as government officers. Dong maintained that the reciprocal actions between man and Heaven are the highest principle of his theory. He believed that man's goodness or evil manipulated Heaven's wishes. He differed from Confucius and Mencius in that Confucius and Mencius advocated making people rich before educating them while Dong placed primary emphasis on education. More importantly, Dong standardized rituals such as offering sacrifices to Heaven, sacrifices at

In general, Confucianism of the Han period had the following features:

- a) Belief in Heaven and a personal god, who watches over the conduct of man and government;
- b) Belief that man is the noblest creature created by the essence of Heaven and Earth, and is favoured by Heaven;
- c) Belief in rewards and punishments for good and evil;
- d) Belief that there is a reciprocal relationship between Heaven and the conduct of man, so that good deeds bring forth propitious omens, and evil deeds, warnings and penalties;
- e) Belief in astrology as the means of predicting events and interpreting the meanings of the Heavenly phenomena.

All these elements were woven into a comprehensive system of politico-religious philosophy of Confucianism.

The Han Confucianists, using their earthly empire as a model, created a Heavenly kingdom, and then used the divine instruction from this Heavenly kingdom to control activities on earth. The natural order was created to be like the social order and acquired the same ethical attributes. Although there was no creation of the world by God, as is found in Western civilization, there were similarities. Confucius was the only sacred teacher, and the Confucian classics had become the yardstick for moral, social, and family life.

The second reformation of Confucianism took place in the Sung dynasty (960-1279 AD). Based upon the experience of the failure of previous dynasties, the rulers during this period centralized military power, finance and administration. Confucianism underwent some reforms to suit new political requirements. Actually, even during the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD), the dynasty immediately preceding the Sung dynasty, Han Yu (768-824 AD), a leading Confucianist thinker, had already upheld the *Mean* to confront Buddhism, while his disciple, Li Ao, had also used the *Mean* to counter-attack Buddhist mysticism.³

the ancestors' temples and regulating altars for various rites. This was Dong's contribution to establishing a religious system for Confucianism. See Li Shen, *Zhongguo Rujiao Shi*, pp. 217 - 241.

³ See Zhu Bosi, *Sanjiao Xinlun*, (Preface dated 1971) p.8. Actually Confucianism was not pure even as early as the Early Han dynasty. Lu Jia's *Xinyu* was regarded one of the purest Confucian classics of Early Han dynasty, yet Daoist thinking such as non-action was found

Although the Three Compendium (*sangang*) of the early Confucianists and Legalists such as Xunzi (331-283) and Han Feizi (? – 233 BC) were merely political and ethical ideals, it was Dong Zhongshu, as mentioned earlier on, who put them into practice in daily life. In order to strengthen their regimes, the rulers always matched imperial power with divinity, paving the way for the acceptance of the fact that the divine bestowed imperial power on them. But in actual fact, the divine power was subordinated to the ruler and was never supposed to surpass that of a sovereign.

In the early Han dynasty, the imperial meeting at the White Tiger Hall was a typical example of a ruler using the “divine” to support his imperial regime. This kind of Confucianism was not the primordial Confucianism of the Pre-Qin period in its own right. It already displayed signs of adaptation.

During the Wei-Jin dynasty (220-420 AD), Daoism and Buddhism flourished, and Confucianism lost its dominance, but it was not deserted. Confucianism was widely influenced by Daoist mysticism. Most of the Confucianists were fond of “Empty Talks” (*qingtan*) though this trend subsided eventually.⁴ After the establishment of Neo-Confucianism in the Sung dynasty, the process of the institutionalization of religious Confucianism was complete. Neo-Confucianism absorbed concepts from Buddhism to re-interpret Confucianism and was different from primordial Confucianism.⁵ Confucianists worshipped Heaven and Earth, the ruler, parents and teachers. Heaven was upheld as the highest authority, teachers were regarded as priests. It contained a theory similar to the Christian belief that man has original sin - desires and selfishness.

Religious Confucianism propagated the belief that poverty was an honour, and upheld the avoidance of material enticements. Religious Confucianism did not make any effort to study the laws of Nature, but concentrated on the purification of the heart. Thus religious Confucianism was like any other religion.

in his thoughts. We were not surprised to see that Confucianism in the Six Dynasties was influenced by Daoists “Empty talks”. See also Yuxueming and Chen Hong, *Zhongguo Gudai di Zhexue yu Zongjiao*, pp. 115-116.

⁴ Yu Xueming and Chen Hong, *Zhongguo Gudai de Zhexue yu Zongjiao*, pp. 60-63.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

2. The inception of Religious Daoism

Religious Daoism emerged at the end of the later Han (25-220 AD) dynasty, just about the time of the spread of Buddhism into China. It might be that the Chinese created this religion to counteract the impact of an alien religious faith.

In ancient times, people worshipped the sun, moon, stars, rivers and seas in the natural world, and their ancestors which they regarded as spirits. This form of worship had eventually evolved into a primordial religion and witchcraft. The witches were, by profession, mediums who communicated with ghosts and spirits on behalf of man. They passed on messages of the gods to men and prayed for blessings. Daoism eventually absorbed traditional sacrificial rituals, together with all these concepts, to form the first indigenous Chinese religion.

The concept of immortals emerged quite early in Chinese history and was widely believed. Most people were enthusiastic pursuers of immortality and transcendence. Magicians (*fangshi*) used many techniques, such as alchemy, herbs, talisman and breathing exercises, to achieve this aim. Daoists incorporated all these beliefs and techniques into their religion.

In the process of the development of an indigenous religion, Daoists drew a lot from the ontological view of life of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. The Daoists saw *Dao* as God who was omnipresent, the source of myriad things, and the saviour of the world.

Daoism represented by *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, was a sort of nature - mysticism. The Daoists discovered nature, expressed their joy and amazement over it, and sought to identify with it, also calling it *Dao*. The Confucian *Dao* represents the right to act, in terms of morals, society and politics. The *Dao* of the Daoists is metaphysical; it is the natural law of the universe. To them, the *Dao* brings all things into existence and governs their every action. The guiding aim of the Daoist is to achieve union with this *Dao* through identification. Since the *Dao* is perceived as eternal, everlasting and unchanging, the individual who achieves unity with it is also considered to have reached eternity. To distinguish this aspect of Daoism from its other expressions, this aspect of it is often referred to as philosophical Daoism.

About the same time that philosophical Daoism was taking shape in the third century BC, there developed another movement that was primarily a religion of salvation. It also aimed at attaining immortal life for individuals. This movement became prevalent about the beginning of the Christian era and represented an amalgamation of all popular ideas and superstitions rampant in Chinese society at that time. It is held that the cult called itself Daoism during the Han dynasty (206 BC – 219 AD) in order to acquire some respectability, since the contents of the texts of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* were ambiguous enough to accommodate its views.

In the religion of salvation, the ambition of Daoists is to acquire material immortality. To the Daoists, man is formed with a spiritual soul and a material body, and consists of elements that disperse at death. Immortality is achieved by conquering these elements that form the body and by preventing them from dispersing. In order to obtain immortal life, certain obligations are necessary. First, the body has to be nourished in order to suppress the causes of decrepitude and to create an embryo endowed with immortality. Second, the spirit had to be nourished, and this involves meditation and concentration. Even during the centuries before the Christian era, Daoists were already engaged in this kind of spiritual cultivation.

Huang Lao's philosophical theories play a great part in the formation of Daoism. Huang-Lao advocated quietness and non-action, concepts that were basically mysterious. The Daoists used the Yin-Yang and Five Phases to interpret Huang-Lao's theories and these became the primordial form of Daoism.⁶

Apart from the influences mentioned above, Confucianism and Moism, especially the prognostics and the Five Phases, can also be found in the Daoist literature *Taiping Jing* and *Laozi Xiang'erzhu*, which have concepts of filial piety, loyalty, the Yin-Yang theories, calamities and strange phenomena. The *Taiping Jing* and *Laozi Xiang'erzhu*, together with the Moists' *Heavenly Wishes*, had paved the way for Daoism to teach the way of spirits and ghosts.⁷ The *Laozi Xiang'erzhu* is annotations using *Laos*'

⁶ For Huang-Lao and Religious Daoism, see R.P. Peerenboom, *Law and Morality in Ancient China*, pp. 256-257.

⁷ *The Taiping Jing* (Canon of Great Peace and Equality) is the earliest Daoist canon which highlights virtues and loyalty to the ruler. The *Laozi Xiang'erzhu* is an important canon for

mysticism to explain Laos's concepts and using *Laozi's* terminologies to expound longevity and immortality.

Being the earliest Daoist canon, the *Taiping Jing* deserves a detailed note here. Its main features are as follows:

- a. It advocates that it is the primordial *qi* that generates the Universe.
- b. It deems that *qi* subdivides into *Yin*, *Yang* and Central Harmony.
- c. It advocates the theory of *Yin*, *Yang* and the Five Phases. It emphasizes that man should follow the signs of warning from Heaven such as natural calamities and catastrophes and make changes.
- d. It advocates that Heaven and man are communicative.
- e. It advocates that misdeeds of ancestors will pass down (*chengfu*) to their posterity who in turn will bear the sufferings on their behalf.
- f. It advocates that each one should try his best, and if so, those of middle capability will gain longevity while those below average, minor longevity.

The *Taiping Jing* put emphasis on accumulation of good deeds and loyalty to the sovereign, respecting of teachers as well as being filial to parents. Its rationale is that a sovereign gives one honour, that is why one should be loyal to him, while a teacher is where one's wisdom comes from, therefore due respect should be accorded. In the respect of cultivation, the *Taiping Jing* emphasizes:

- a. Guard major internal organs and make them firm.
- b. Guard that body and spirit be inseparable and form an entity so as to achieve longevity.
- c. Take the *qi* breath and medicine and follow the formula from canons when preparing elixirs.
- d. It upholds equality and justice as its social ideal.

Buddhism also served as a point of reference, and its rituals as well as its tenets were also absorbed into the Daoist system.⁸ Evidence shows that

further understanding the teaching of Wudoumi Daoist Sect (The Five Bushels of Rice Sect of the Later Han dynasty). In this canon, *Dao* is the highest god, surpassing all human beings.

⁸ See Ren Jiyu *Zhongguo Daojiao Shi*, pp.154-159 and p. 187. See also Dang Shengyuan and Li Jikai, *Zhongguo Gudai Daohshi Shenghuo*, p.10.

Daoism drew its tenets from Buddhism. Thus its compatibility or all embracing nature is revealed. For instance, an important Daoist canon *DongxuanLingbao Jing* modelled upon Buddhist sutras in form by changing Buddhist terminologies and absorbing Buddhist tenets such as *nirvana*, retribution and *karma*. Another Daoist canon, *Zhengao* copied a Buddhist sutra *Sishi'erzhang Jing*. A third Daoist canon, *Taishangdong Xuanling Baozhi Huidingzhi Tongwei Jing* was based on the Buddhist belief in accumulating merits and upon death ascending to Heavenly paradise. In fact Daoism's compatibility can be further shown in that it absorbs some of Confucian concepts such as loyalty, filial piety, propriety and righteousness for its disciplines. For example, a Daoist canon, *Dajue Shangpin Jing*, wished that when a Daoist saw an emperor, he should be as filial (loyal) to him as he would be to his own parents. Furthermore, the creation of Daoist gods could be inspired by Buddhism.

Taiping Jing, which already contained tenets, later branched out into two different Daoist sects. One was the Elixirs Sect while the other was the Talismans Sect. The highest gods of Daoism are the Three Purities followed by the Jade Emperor, Heavenly Officials (*Tianguan*), Earthly Officials (*Diguan*), Water Officials (*Shuiguan*), which are composed of the pedigree of the Daoist gods. The Daoists also believe that there are gods everywhere, even in human bodies and organs.⁹

During the Wei-Jin period (220-420 AD), along with the emerging Daoism, the movement of creating deities was overwhelming. In the Northern Wei dynasty, Kou Qianzhi (386-448 AD) created gods in the 36 Heavenly Palaces,¹⁰ while in the Sung dynasty of the Six Dynasties period (470-589 AD), Tao Hongjing (456-536 AD) classified 700 gods into nine levels, each level having a principal god at the center flanked either by male or female gods.¹¹ Historical figures also had a place in these

⁹ Names of gods and spirits of human organs can be found in a Daoist canon, *Yunji Qiqian*, See Ren Jiyu, *Zhongguo Daojiao Shi*, p. 137; see also Dang Shengyuan and Li Jikai, *Zhongguo Daoshi Shenghuo*, p. 38 note no. 4.

¹⁰ Kou Qianzhi was an important Daoist in the development of Daoism. In the 36 Heavens created, each had a palace, presided over by a god. The highest God was "Wuji Zhi Jun" (The Limitless and Most Sacred Lord). See Re Jiyu, *Zhongguo Daojiao Shi*, p. 207.

¹¹ Tao Hongjing was also an important Daoist in the development of Daoism. He constructed the system and hierarchy of gods and immortality. See Ren Jiyu, *Zhongguo Daojiao Shi*, pp. 179-183.

hierarchies.¹² Tao Hongjing was very intelligent and widely read. Normally Daoists pursued immortality. This might be regarded as religious illusion, but because of Tao Hongjing's vast scholarship, while he practised Daoism, he delved deeply into research and he composed, valuable canons such as *Zhengao*, *Dengzhen Yinlunjue* and *Bencao Jizhu*. He contributed extensively in alchemy and in establishing the Maoshan Daoist Sect.

The Daoists believed death was the disintegration of corpse and soul, and another way to attain salvation was ascendance into Heaven. There are altogether 36 heavenly palaces in the sky as mentioned earlier. The immortals are classified into three types. The first type is those who can fly, the second are those who wander around. Those who cannot ascend to Heaven live in caves on earth or on islands. There are 10 caves and 36 minor caves and 72 places of blessings, which occupy all the major scenic places on earth.¹³

3. The Spread and Adaptability of Buddhism into China

The dream of Emperor Ming (58-75 AD) of the Han dynasty has often been connected with the introduction of Buddhism to China. Briefly, the episode was as follows: One night in a dream, Emperor Ming saw a golden deity flying in front of his palace, and the next day he asked his ministers to explain the identity of this deity. One of them, Fu Yi, replied that he heard there was a sage in India who had attained salvation and became Buddha, who was able to fly and whose body was of a gold hue. He went on to say that the deity seen in the dream was this Buddha. The emperor accepted his explanation and dispatched envoys abroad to learn more about this sage and his teachings. The envoys returned bringing back with them a Sutra in 42 Sections, which was received by the emperor and deposited in a temple constructed outside the walls of the capital Loyang.¹⁴ In fact, Buddhism had already existed in China slightly earlier

¹² See Dang Shengyuan and Li Jikai, *Zhongguo Gudai Daoshi Shenghuo*, p. 28.

¹³ See Dang Shengyuan and Li Jikai, *ibid.*, p. 38 note no. 4.

¹⁴ The contents of this section are basically drawn from K. Chen, *Chinese Buddhism, A Historical Survey* unless otherwise stated.

than the later part of the Han dynasty, though its influence was insignificant.¹⁵

a. Buddhist teachings in the Han dynasty

Among the many tenets of Buddhism, were the indestructibility of the soul and the circle of rebirth and karma. In the beginning, Chinese Buddhists had difficulty understanding the idea of repeated rebirths without some entity linking together the different stages of rebirth. To overcome this difficulty, they evolved the concept of *Shenling*, or an indestructible soul that is transmitted through successive rebirths. Man consists of a material body and a spiritual soul. The body comes into being at birth and disintegrates at death, but the soul is indestructible and eternal. Due to the effects of the karma, this soul is forever bound to the circle of rebirths. The *Hou Hanji* of Yuan Hing (318-376), summarized these different arguments succinctly. The Buddhists also teach that when a person dies, his soul does not perish, but is reborn and assumes another form. The meritorious and evil deeds performed during one's lifetime all have their rewards and punishments. Therefore, the *Hou Hanji* values the practice of meritorious deeds and the cultivation of the way so as to discipline the soul. By so doing, they are able to attain *nirvana* and become Buddha.

b. Period of Preparation

By the end of the Han dynasty, two different trends had already developed in Buddhism. One was the Dhyana School with its emphasis on mind cultivation and the suppression of passions. It was Hinayana in nature. The chief transmitter was An Xigao of Persian origin.

Contrary to this school was the Prajna School. It was based largely on the translation of Chih Ch'an and was Mahayana inclined. It was more interested in probing the nature of the Buddha and ultimate reality behind the external appearance of things. Beginning in the middle of the third century, this sect of Buddhism was to grow and develop until it became dominant within Buddhism in the Southern Dynasties (470-589 AD). The

¹⁵ For detailed discussion, see D. Ikeda (Author), Burton Watson (Translator) *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism*, pp. 9-13.

popularity of the Prajna School brought about two results: 1) The spread of Mahayana Buddhism in China; 2) the development of close relations between Buddhist monks and the Chinese literati who embraced the thoughts of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, especially those of quietness and non-activity.

Early translators of Buddhist texts were almost all foreigners (non-Chinese). At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty (617-420 AD), a prominent translator, An Xigao, was the son of a Persian king who had abdicated the throne. The most prominent translator was Lokaraksa (Zhi Loujiaqian), from Great Yuezhi (Kushana), and according to *Chu Sanzang Ji* (Translation of Tripitaka and other Miscellaneous Essays), there were 30 sutras translated by him.

At the end of the Three Kingdoms period, Indian and Central Asian monks came to China in order to spread Buddhism. Some came from Indo-China, but whether they were Indo-Chinese is not clear. Among them, the most prominent one was Dhamarkala (Tangke Jialuo). A learned man, he was born in India and was familiar with astrology. His major contribution to Chinese Buddhism was the translation of the Buddhist Laws. Another translator by the name of Zhiqian, was of Great Yuezhi origin but was totally sinicised. He began to study foreign languages at the age of 13, and was proficient in 6 languages. He translated 30 sutras into Chinese.¹⁶

Kang Senghui was of Kangju origin (Sogdina, in present day Sarmarkand). The family lived in India for generations. His father was a merchant who migrated to Kochin (Jiaozhi). Both Zhiqian and Kang Senghui were bilingual in Central Asian languages and Chinese.

In Western Jin (265-316 AD), QiYu came to China from Funan (present Cambodia) and then to Kochin, eventually arrived in Xiangyang of Hubei via Guangzhou, Yuchang (present day Nanchang) and Hunan. Another monk Zhu Shulan, of Indian origin, was born in Henan. He was the translator of important sutras such as *Fangguang Panruo Jing* (a version of Prajna Sutra) and *Weimoji Jing* (*Vimalakirti Sutra*), which amounted

¹⁶ See Kamata Shigeo's book translated into Chinese titled *Zhongguo Fojiao Tongshi*, Vol. 1, p. 155 and pp. 195-199.

to more than 100,000 words. Zhu was proficient in Chinese and several Central Asian languages, and his translations were precise and accurate.

Among these translators, Kumarajiva (active around 400 AD) was the greatest translator of Buddhist texts¹⁷. He was well versed in Buddhist philosophy and learned in medicine, astronomy, exegetics, technology and logic. Being proficient in Indian and Chinese languages, his translations were not only noted for their skill and beauty of language, but also for their accuracy. It was generally believed that later, the great Chinese translator of Buddhist texts, Xuanzang (602-624) of the Tang dynasty, surpassed him almost in every sutra ever translated. In actual fact, some of Kurarajiva's translations remained standard despite efforts put in by Xuanzang to re-translate them.

As the Sanskrit language was very difficult and the translators were not always accurate, there were a number of monks who braved the geographical distance and climate and went to India through Central Asia to obtain the authentic meanings of the sutras.

One of the pioneers was Fa Xiang (340-420 AD).¹⁸ He recorded the following: "In the deserts were numerous evil spirits and scorching winds, causing death to anyone who would meet them. Above there were no birds, while on the ground there were no animals. One looked as far as one could in all directions for a path to cross, but there were none to choose. Only the dry bones of the dead served as indications...."

On crossing the Pamirs, he wrote, "The path was difficult and rocky and ran along a cliff extremely steep. The mountain itself was one sheer wall of rock 8000 feet high, and as one approached it, one became dizzy. If one wished to advance, there was no place for him to place his feet. Below was the Indus River...."¹⁹

Despite these dangers and hardships in succeeding centuries, many other Chinese monks followed in his footsteps and went to India to acquire the wisdom of the Indians, and returned to China to transmit the sutras to their

¹⁷ See D. Ikeda, *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism*, translated by Burton Watson, pp. 33-56.

¹⁸ For Fa Xiang, *ibid.*, pp.73-76.

¹⁹ For a brief introduction of Fa Xiang's travel to India, *ibid.*, pp. 69-86.

fellow Chinese. This period was a period of preparation for Chinese Buddhism. In the beginning, only a limited number of sutras were available, and there were no outstanding Chinese monks at all. By the end of Eastern Jin in 420 AD, some of the most eminent monks had completed their tasks and had made available important Mahayana texts such as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Nirvana Sutra*.

More important was the fact that this period witnessed Chinese Buddhism developing along two divergent lines in the north and south. In the North, the emphasis of the Buddhist monk was upon rendering service in the form of military and diplomatic counsel to the non-Chinese rulers of the era. The relationship cultivated greatly benefited the development of Buddhism at a later stage.

c. Growth in the period of disunity (Northern and Southern Dynasties)

When the Han dynasty fell in AD 220, Buddhism was barely able to maintain its existence in Chinese soil and had to seek support from Daoism to retain its foothold. By the time the country was reunited in 581 AD (the Sui dynasty), however, Buddhism had spread to all parts of the empire; converts had been made in all strata of society; images, statues and temples were prevalent everywhere; and a great source of literature had accumulated. There were 1768 temples and 24000 monks and 2846 nuns in the Sung dynasty. It was said that the number of Buddhist texts circulated exceeded the number of Confucian texts by several tens to a hundred times. And in the region of the Yangtze and south, where the Liang dynasty ruled from 502-557 AD, there are reported to have been over 2,800 temples and 82,700 monks and nuns. In addition, of course, there must have been great numbers of lay believers.²⁰

A conspicuous point of Buddhist adaptability was that Chinese Buddhism espoused the cardinal Confucian virtue of filial piety. Once a person joined the monastic order, he severed all relations with his family and society, so that he was no longer bound to honour his ancestors. Yet in the description found at Yunkang and Longmen, there were indications that

²⁰ See D. Ikeda (author) and B. Watson (translator), *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism*, p.31.

donors prayed for their ancestors to attain meritorious rebirths in paradise. Stupas of Buddhas were erected to perpetuate the memory of their parents. This shows that Buddhism adapted itself to suit Chinese customs.²¹

Among the factors causing Buddhism's growth in the period of disunity were:

a. Its attraction to the commoners

Among the Buddhist monks in north China during the period of disunity there were many who were proficient in the interpretation of charms, or who claimed to be able to predict the future. By such powers of prognostication, Buddhist monks were able to gain wide attention among the general public. Such feats attracted both the common people and the ruling classes. By giving advice on the outcome of military movements or the reliability of some of the officials, the monks obtained state support and patronization.

Karma, the doctrine of personal reward and retribution gave hope to those who were sunk in hardship and misery during the period of uncertainty. The ideal held by Mahayana was that all creatures, no matter how low or humble, possessed the Buddha nature and so were capable of attaining Buddhahood and salvation. Such a noble ideal had never been put forth before common Chinese people until this time, and it acted like a magnet, drawing people to Buddhism. Mahayana's repetition of the names of Amitaba also made the path leading to this type of salvation very easy.

b. The attraction to the intellectuals

The failure of the Confucian system to provide a satisfactory outlet for the religious aspirations of the Chinese people also contributed to the growth of Buddhism. Individuals normally desired communion with deities to find solace for their own sorrows and disappointments, or to ask for divine assistance when their earthly burdens seemed too heavy to bear. Such

²¹ For adaptability of Buddhism, see Yu Xueming and Chen Hong, *Zhongguo Gudai di Zhexue yu Zongjiao*, pp. 108-110; see also Kamata Shigeo, *Zhongguo Fojiao Tongshi*, Vol. II, pp. 202-206. The preface to this book in Vol. I especially pp. 32-45 on the exchanges of Buddhism and Confucian are useful for a quick reference.

earthly burdens tend to become accentuated in times of uncertainty and instability.

Confucianism, with its lack of emphasis on the spiritual world (one of its most important doctrines advocated respect for the spirits while still keeping them at distance) was too earth-bound and practical to satisfy the religious yearning of common people. Buddhism stepped in to fill this gap. It brought with it a host of deities in the form of ever compassionate and merciful Bodhisattvas, always ready to supply aid to those who sought their assistance. It dazzled the Chinese with a brilliant hierarchy of heavens, and rebirth, which was held up as the reward for meritorious living on earth. At the same time, it depicted hells, where the tortures became progressively more terrifying. As a Chinese philosopher Hu Shi once expressed it, the Chinese were so captivated by this colourful pageantry of heavens and hells that they succumbed easily to the Buddhist religion.

c. Maturity and acceptance

After adequate preparation, Chinese Buddhism flourished and bloomed in the Tang Dynasty and developed its own characteristics. A lot of *Yijing* (modified sutras) were created. These modified sutras first appear in the Southern dynasties, and later on, more and more of such sutras emerged. The mixing of these sutras with a number of Chinese teachings, enhanced their Chineseness. There were altogether 209 such sutras according to *Seng Zhao's Xinji Yiping Weizhuan Jilu*.²²

4. The Synthesis of the Three Teachings

Ever since the introduction of Buddhism into China, the three teachings have always been intertwined through conflict and synthesis. Buddhism as an alien religion, naturally faced the resistance of Chinese culture, especially by Confucianism. The main conflict was between Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, while the conflict between Confucianism and

²² See K. Shigeo, *Zhongguo Fo jiao Tongshi*, pp. 171-174.

Daoism was minor. This was because Confucianism and Daoism had their roots in the same culture, complementing and supplementing each other.²³

During the Eastern Jin dynasty, despite general antagonism towards Buddhism, we can already see the amalgamation of Confucianism and Buddhism. There were scholars such as Dao'an (312-385 AD), who were born into traditional Confucian families. He studied under FoTucheng for 14 years. At the age of 38, he went to Hengshan of the Taihang Ranges, and later he returned to Jizhou in Hebei, and from Jizhou later he lived for 15 years in Xiangyang of Hubei where he had hundred of followers and his influence even extended to Jingzhou. He was captured in Chang'an where he died 5 or 6 years later. He was skilled at composing poems, well versed in Confucian classics and Buddhist sutras (*jing*), the disciplines (*lu*) and treaties (*lun*).²⁴

In fact, Eastern Jin was the earliest meeting point of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism and the place where they adopted many aspects of one another. Through various conflicts and competition, the merging of the three religions into a single religion commenced. This was typified by the case of Su Chuo (?- 367 AD). He was fond of *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* and was fascinated by the hermit's life style. Yet he took up government posts as the Confucianists did. He had, to his credit, writings on Confucianism and Buddhism.²⁵ He deemed the Confucian sages to be equal to Buddhist saints. He combined Confucianism and Buddhism's views in his writing, *Yudaolun* (Essays Revealing the Dao).²⁶

Though there were efforts to reconcile the three religions, unfortunately, the conflicts between these three teachings mixed with unending political struggles. Buddhism was persecuted bitterly twice in the Northern Dynasties. Each time monasteries were demolished and sutras were burnt, monks were secularised.²⁷ But Buddhism tried to maintain its own characteristics, and at the same time, it tried to adapt to new circumstances. This approach worked quite well, and Buddhism succeeded in becoming part of the Chinese culture.

²³ See Yu Xueming and Chen Hong, *Zhongguo Gudai di Zhexue yu Zongjiao*, pp. 108-114.

²⁴ See K. Shigeo, Vol. I, pp. 347 - 364.

²⁵ See K. Shigeo, *Zhongguo Fojiao Tongshi*, Vol. II, p. 204.

²⁶ K. Shigeo, *Zhongguo Fojiao Tongshi*, Vol. II, pp. 202-206.

²⁷ c/f the description of Dasaku Ikeda, *The Flower of Chinese Buddhism*, pp. 153-168.

Buddhism emphasized the renouncing of the world, which contradicts Chinese cultural beliefs. Therefore it had to reach a compromise with Chinese culture. The *Mouzi Lihelun* is a work representing a general view of the people of the Wei-Jin period (220-420 AD), it attacked Buddhist sutras, saying that they were alien and would not be accepted by *ru* Confucianism. In addition, the fact that Buddhism advocated the renouncing of the world and destroyed one's outward appearance, meant it was not compatible with Confucian ethics. Further, Buddhism talked about rebirths and karma, and this too did not match Confucian teachings.

The Buddhists refuted the incompatibility accusations, arguing that whatever is good should be adopted, and that they should not necessarily adopt these teachings from Confucius and other sages. On top of this, the distinction between Chinese and alien people were not so clear-cut. The Confucian sages, such as the great Yu were of Qiang origin (probably a north western tribe in China)²⁸ and thus, not Chinese. The Buddhists' renunciation of their families was a minor matter when compared to moral cultivation, and Buddhists do have moral cultivation. On top of that, if Buddhists have achieved Buddhahood and have returned to help their parents and brothers, they are also filial or even better. The Chinese custom of invoking ghosts and offering sacrifices is no different from the Buddhist karma.

In the 2nd century, there was a legend that *Laozi* went to the West to educate the barbarians; this legend was purposely fabricated to show the superiority of Chinese culture.²⁹ In order to gain a foothold in China, Buddhists tolerated this fabrication. They even said that *Laozi* and Confucius were saints of Buddhism.

During the Six Dynasties (235-589 AD), the cultural exchanges between religions were more thorough. Buddhism had ambitions not only to convince Daoists and Confucianists, but also to win superiority, to be

²⁸ For a full discussion of the Qiang tribe, see Huang Li, *Zhongguo Gudai Minzushi Yanjiu*, 1987, p. 45-47.

²⁹ A Daoist by the name of Wang Fu of the Western Jin, based on the legend of *Laozi*, fabricated *Laozi Huahu Jing* (A Canon that *Laozi* taught the Hu barbarious Indians) just to show the Chinese superiority. See K. Shigeo, *Zhongguo Fojiao Tongshi* Vol. 1, pp. 288-298).

ranked first in the hierarchy. Confucianism and Daoism were reluctant to give up their own orthodox status; so heated debates took place.³⁰ The issues were as follows: the distinction between Chinese and alien people, whether monks should show respect to emperors and kowtow to them or not; and the belief in the indestructibility of a soul.

Monk Seng You (445-518 AD)³¹ argued that the territorial distinction between China and alien states was not fixed. The sages held in high esteem by the Chinese, such as Emperors Yu and Shun, were not of Chinese origin. The Chinese upheld this distinction out of ethnic pride. Of course, this was conservative and harmful because it blocked the path of cultural interactions with other civilizations.

The issue of whether monks should kowtow to emperors reflects the contradictions between Buddhism and the ruling regimes. The monks were forbidden to kowtow to common people and even to their parents. But the supremacy of emperors was so deeply rooted in Chinese culture, that this problem was not easy to solve.

Monk Hue Yuan (334-416 AD)³² explained that living in the mundane world is different from renouncing the world; therefore monks do not have to kowtow to emperors. The argument also abated for a while but recurred during the Tang Dynasty. Both parties eventually compromised agreeing that monks did not have to kowtow to emperors, but should acknowledge themselves as subjects of the emperor.

In the South Dynasty, Buddhists believed that the soul was indestructible. They likened souls to firewood and fire. Hueyuan said that fire was passed onto wood, and when the wood finished, the fire could be passed on to another piece of wood, likewise, the soul was passed onto the body, and

³⁰ The debates on the ranking of the three religions and related issues took place from 463-466 about 8 different times under the reign of Emperor Wu of Liang dynasty (See K. Shigeo, *op. ci.*, pp. 451-478). The struggles were on and off throughout the history of China. The ranking was not always in this manner: Daoism followed by Buddhism and Confucianism. It all depended on the liking and sponsorship of each individual emperor.

³¹ For Monk Seng You's life and work, see Mou Zongjian and Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo Zongjiao Tongshi*, pp. 418-420; see also Yu Xueming and Chen Hong, *Zhongguo Gudai di Zongjiao yu Zhaxue*, p. 111.

³² For Hui Yuan's thought, see Mou Zongjian and Zhang Jian, *Zhongguo Zongjiao Tongshi*, p. 400.

when the body decomposes, the soul can be passed onto other forms, and therefore souls were indestructible. This is the origin of the theory of retribution.

But in the Qi-Liang period (479-557 AD), Fan Zhen challenged this theory. He regarded soul and body as an organic entity. Fan asserted that the fate of different people was different, and this was not the result of retribution. He considered man's fate to be like the flowers on a tree. When a flower falls on a carpet, he is lucky enough; but if it drops in the mud, he is unlucky. He said this was natural and contingent, not predestined. Fan was very famous and influential, and many intellectuals followed the debate closely.

Thus, we can see that from Eastern Jin to the South dynasties, there was a period of conflict, but by obtaining gradual consensus, compatibility emerged. Buddhism tried hard to identify its similarities with the other two religions, at the same time Confucianism and Daoism also tried to adapt the Buddhist way of thinking. Within the spirit of mutual understanding, the three religions were involved in gradually merging into one. Buddhism became more sinicised and had a new direction. It placed emphasis on the heart and mind, and influenced the Chinese culture immensely.

In Tang times, the issue of supremacy continued to spark conflicts. From the Sui dynasty to mid-Tang, the translation of Buddhism was extensive and was fully absorbed by the Chinese intellectuals; Confucianists were amazed that they were short of such profundity. Ever since the Wei-Jin dynasties (220-420 AD), Daoism had continuously learned from Buddhism in the areas of thought, ritual, organization and canon, while Confucianism from late Tang, commenced to absorb Buddhist and Daoists ideas in order to revive itself. On the other hand, Buddhism also absorbed the Daoist's nourishment of life, and incorporated the filial piety of Confucianism into its system of beliefs. Thus, the synthesis of the three was complete at the end of the late Tang dynasty.

5. Conclusion

The above paper has portrayed some characteristics of Chinese culture, especially in the area of religion. China was, and will be a great political and economic entity. Its contacts with other cultures are wide and extensive. It will also continue to be so in the Information Technology age and more globalized environment. History shows that it is difficult for a great culture to survive without any adaptation to new challenges; it is very difficult for any great culture to survive if it is not broad-minded and adaptable!

By accepting an injection of new blood to revitalize itself, Chinese culture, like any other culture in the world, will proceed in this direction.

Author's note and acknowledgements

The early draft of this paper was based heavily on the following four books and other textbooks, but subsequently authoritative works were cited to substantiate the facts. Of course, some of the views were derived from my own teaching experience when I taught a module entitled *Chinese History and Culture*. The four books are: Dang Shengyuan and Li Jikai, *Zhongguo Gudai Daoshi Shenghuo (The Daoists Lives in Ancient China)*; Yu Xueming and Chen Hong, *Zhongguo Gudai de Zhexue yu Zongjiao (Philosophy and Religions in Ancient China)*; Eva Wong, *The Shambhala Taoism, A Complete Introduction to the History, Philosophy, and Practice of an Ancient Chinese Spiritual Tradition* (Shambhala, Boston and London, 1997) and Chen Kenneth, *Buddhism in China, A Historical Survey*. Other books referred to for completing this paper are also listed below. Because of time constraints, the author is apologetic for not being able to indicate every source, but he intends to do so in the next revision. The author wishes to thank Emeritus Professor Liu Ts'un-yan for his comments and suggestions for the early draft. Dr. Tan Cheng Lim and Miss Cecily Layzell for their quick check of the English of this paper. This paper was originally intended to be delivered at a forum on Chinese culture for the general public and not for specialists.

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1. Historical Development

For the last 2500 years, the development of Chinese thought and culture has undergone influence of European thought and religion. This volume will discuss briefly the history of the traditional Chinese thought, philosophy and religion in the western world. It will then examine the possibility of the compatibility and the survival of the Chinese thought in the world.

Especially, the main periods of development of Chinese thought and religion are as follows:

Confucius (551-479 BC)

Mencius (371-289 BC)

Xunzi (298-238 BC)

Wang Yangmian Dynasty (1024-1125 AD)

16th-17th Century - Christian Missionaries

19th Century (1840-1911 AD)

20th Century (1911-1949 AD)

1949-1979

1979-1989

1989-1999

20th Century - Last Century and Foreign Religions

Confucius (551-479 BC)

Confucius was an eminent educator of the East. He was born in 551 BC in the Age of Spring and Autumn, known as the Age of great variety in eastern China. In his lifetime, Confucius has shown 3000 disciples. He edited the "Classic Texts". Scholars were born of various schools of ideas. Confucius' disciples developed the old order to a new order. The old order was gradually destroyed or changed. The teachings of the past of Confucius' disciples were also extended abroad. Among 2500 years, the historical development of Chinese and western religions, all of