

# 龍 Chinese Religion

Chinese religion is not an organized, unified system of beliefs and practices. It has no leadership, no headquarters, no founder, and no denominations. Instead, "Chinese religion" is a general term used to describe the complex interaction of different religious and philosophical traditions that have been especially influential in China.

Although other religious traditions have been influential in China, Chinese religion is primarily composed of four main traditions: Chinese folk religion, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The religious outlook of most Chinese people consists of some combination of beliefs and practices from these four traditions. It is very rare for only one to be practiced to the exclusion of the others.

## Confucian beliefs

Confucianism is a way of life taught by Confucius in the 6th–5th century BC. Sometimes viewed as a philosophy, sometimes as a religion, Confucianism is perhaps best understood as an all-encompassing humanism that neither denies nor slights Heaven.

Confucianism has been followed by the Chinese for more than two millennia. It has deeply influenced spiritual and political life in China; its influence has also extended to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. East Asians may profess themselves to be Shintoists, Taoists, Buddhists, Muslims, or Christians - but seldom do they cease to be Confucians.

The main principle of Confucianism is *ren* ("humaneness" or "benevolence"), signifying excellent character in accord with *li* (ritual norms), *zhong* (loyalty to one's true nature), *shu* (reciprocity), and *xiao* (filial piety). Together these constitute *de* (virtue).

Confucianism is characterized by a highly optimistic view of human nature. The faith in the possibility of ordinary human beings to become awe-inspiring sages and worthies is deeply rooted in the Confucian heritage (Confucius himself lived a rather ordinary life), and the insistence that human beings are teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavour is typically Confucian.

Confucius regarded Heaven (*T'ien*) as a positive and personal force in the universe; he was not, as some have supposed, an agnostic or a sceptic.

## Taoist Beliefs

The ancient Chinese religion of Taoism is not entirely distinct from Confucianism or Chinese folk religion, for all Chinese religion and philosophy operate within the same ancient worldview.

Since earliest times, Chinese thought has been characterized by an awareness of man's close relationship with nature and the universe, a cyclical view of time and the universe, veneration or worship of ancestors, the idea of Heaven, and belief in the divinity of the sovereign.

Both Confucianism and Taoism operate within this worldview and incorporate many of its concepts. These two organized belief systems are best viewed as complementary rather than competitive. While Confucianism concerns itself with the social and moral side of life, Taoism focuses on the individual, spiritual life.

"The way that can be spoken of  
is not the constant Way;

The name that can be named  
is not the constant Name.

The nameless was at the beginning of heaven and earth;

the named was the mother of myriad creatures."

--*Tao Te Ching*

Taoism (also spelled Daoism) is based on the teachings of the *Tao Te Ching*, a short tract written in the 6th century BC in China. Its emphasis on spiritual harmony within the individual complements Confucianism's focus on social duty. Today, there are 20 million Taoists worldwide, most of whom live in China, Taiwan or Southeast Asia. Taoism is also increasingly influential in the West, especially in the field of alternative medicine and in martial arts like Tai Chi.

## **Buddhist Beliefs**

Given the association of Buddhism with the meditating monk, one might well assume that Buddhism emphasises practices over beliefs. It is true that right practices are important in Buddhism, but the faith really centres on correct understanding of human nature and ultimate reality.

The Buddha, after all, was called the "Enlightened One." After he became enlightened, he taught that the way to eliminate suffering begins with understanding the true nature of the world. However, the Buddha considered knowledge important only insofar as it remains practical. He rejected speculation about such matters as God, the nature of the universe, and the afterlife, urging his followers to focus instead on the Four Noble Truths by which they can free themselves from suffering.