

ELEMENTS OF CHINESE RELIGION

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1) CONFUCIANISM:

A humanistic value-system based on the teachings of Confucius (Kongzi: 551- 479 BCE). It stresses the moral responsibilities of the individual as a member of society. Confucian ideals are to be attained in one's everyday life, through individual moral cultivation and the fulfillment of one's proper roles in society. Though the early thinkers Mencius (Mengzi) and Hsün-tzu (Xunzi) debated human nature, Confucians generally share a common assumption that human nature and/or society are ultimately perfectible. Though called "humanistic," Confucian ideals were originally grounded in a belief that humanity is perfectible because our higher qualities somehow come from "Heaven" (T'ien/Tian). Also, the Confucian tradition includes a liturgical tradition in which Confucius is venerated as a spiritual being. But most Confucian leaders since the 10th century have been humanistic intellectuals leery of any concept of a personalized higher reality. Influenced by Taoism and Buddhism, those "Neo-Confucians" developed sophisticated metaphysical theories as well as meditative practices. Westerners often overlook the Neo-Confucian pursuit of individual "sagehood."

2) TAOISM:

Includes both a classical school of thought (fl. 4th-2nd centuries BCE) and an organized religion (fl. 2nd-12th centuries CE). Classical Taoism — represented by texts like the *Nei-yeh* (*Neiye*), *Lao-tzu* (*Laozi*), *Chuang-tzu* (*Zhuangzi*), and *Huai-nan-tzu* (*Huainanzi*) — stressed a return to natural harmony with life's basic realities; such harmony, they thought, typified humanity's original state. Later Taoism is rich and complex. It began as a sacerdotal, liturgical tradition centered upon the socio-political ideal of a world that functions in holistic harmony. The Taoist priesthood was, in early and medieval times, open to women, apparently on equal terms with men. Other strands of later Taoism, like Ch'üan-chen (Quanzhen), stress individual spiritual self-cultivation. After the 12th century, liturgical Taoism (like the Cheng-i tradition) became socially marginal, and gradually lost the respect of intellectuals. But Ch'üan-chen Taoism also endures, though it is largely unknown in the West.

3) BUDDHISM:

Buddhism originated in India, and spread to China around the 1st century CE, though it did not catch on there until about the 4th-5th centuries. Many forms of Buddhism were introduced to China, including "H_nay_na" and "Vajray_na" traditions as well as the Mah_y_na philosophies known as M_dhyamika, Yog_c_ra, and "the Perfection of Wisdom" (Prajñ_p_ramit_). Chinese Buddhists also constructed new intellectual syntheses, such as T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen Buddhism. But the two forms of Buddhism that flourished longest in China were "Pure Land" (the belief in universal salvation by the Buddha Amit_bha) and Ch'an (the monastic

tradition better known by its Japanese name, Zen). All the Chinese forms of Buddhism were later transmitted to Japan.

4) "**Official Religion**": The entire tradition of governmental rites and related concepts. The emperor was conceived as an intermediary between humanity and the guiding force of Heaven. The ruler's officials adopted Confucianism as an ideological support, and tried to focus and limit the emperor's power. This was not a "state religion" imposed upon the people.

5) "**Folk Religion**": All manifestations of "religion" that a given interpreter does not consider appropriate to attribute directly to Confucianism, Taoism, or Buddhism. "Folk religion" has existed as long as there have been "folk" in China.