

Religion in Chinese Social and Political History

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In the previous chapters of this book, we presented general portraits of religious life in contemporary cities, rural areas, and ethnic minority regions, and then we explored how Chinese religious culture relates to the themes of the body, gender, environment, and civil society. In this and the next two chapters, we will see how the many ideas, practices, and communities fit together within a broader and evolving sociopolitical system, which can be understood only if we take a long-range historical perspective. Indeed, religious life today can be seen as made up of several layers of tradition, in which the social and political features of each era have left their mark, and in which each new element has interacted with previous layers. The aggregate result is the great diversity of religious beliefs and practices that exist in the Chinese world today—a diversity that, although it is not unified into a single structure, presents several common themes.

In this historical presentation, we will trace the appearance and recurrence of several of these themes, many of which were presented in previous chapters of this book. These themes include *divination*; the *vereneration of ancestors*; the *ruler's relationship with Heaven or a supreme divinity* as a source of political legitimacy; the notion of the *mandate of Heaven* and the importance of *virtue and ritual propriety* in social relations and government; a *holistic cosmological system* of *yin-yang* powers and cycles; the search for longevity and immortality through practices of *body cultivation*; *millenarian movements* sometimes associated with rebellions; interference by the Chinese state in the *authority of religious institutions*; a *commercial ethic* associating morality and material prosperity; and the tensions and mutual interactions between the teachings of *Confucianism*, *Daoism*, and *Buddhism*, as well as with the later additions of *Islam* and *Christianity*. In spite of over one century of reform movements, revolutions, and modernizing campaigns from the nineteenth century until today, these themes continue to influence much of the religious life and sociopolitical relationships in the Chinese world today. They are also elements of the general religious and spiritual culture that, through processes of globalization, is now spreading to other parts of the world.

Ancestor Worship and the Religious Foundations of Political Legitimacy: The Shang (1766–1027 BCE)

THE EMPEROR'S TOOTHACHE

Five turtle shells lie on the rammed-earth altar. The plastrons have been polished like jade, but are scarred on their inner side with rows of oval hollows, some already blackened by fire. Into one of the unburned hollows, on the right side of the shell, the diviner Chui is thrusting a brand of flaming thorn. Fanned by an assistant to keep the glowing tip intensely hot, the stick flames against the surface of the shell. Smoke rises. The seconds slowly pass. The stench of scorched bone mingles with the aroma of millet wine scattered in libation. And then, with a sharp, clear, “*puk*”-like sound, the turtle, most silent of creatures, speaks. A crack has formed in the hollow where the plastron was scorched. Once again the brand is thrust, now into a matching hollow on the left side of the shell. The diviner cries out: “It is due to Father Jia!” [the king’s uncle, a deceased former king].¹

The first historical dynasty of China was called the Shang, which ruled around 3000–3700 years ago. This was a kingdom of warriors and conquerors, the first to unify the many tribes around the middle course of the Yellow River, in the North China Plain. Most of the people were peasants who lived in Stone Age conditions; they were ruled by noble clans that owned horses and war chariots and lived in walled towns that served as the capital of their domains.

The largest structures in these towns were the tombs of the dead kings and noblemen, and the temples in which these ancestors were worshipped. Kingship rotated between ten branches of the royal clan—but the supreme lord and arbiter of human fortune and misfortune was a deity named Di. This god was inaccessible to humans, but the ancestors of the royal clan could intercede on behalf of living rulers. The ancestors, on the other hand, needed honor, food, and provisions from humans. The art of ruling, then, involved managing a mutually beneficial relationship with the ancestors, through reverential veneration and generous sacrificial offerings of grain and wine, presented in exquisite bronze vessels, as well as animals, and even humans.

Victories in battle and good harvests—political power and economic prosperity—were seen as signs of the ancestors’ satisfaction and of Di’s favor, which could be repaid through more sumptuous and costly sacrificial offerings. The awesome scale and cost of these rituals impressed on the hearts of ministers, subjects, and rivals that the king was favored by the Lord, that his domination was legitimate and beneficial.

Defeat in war, mutual calamities, and illness, on the other hand, signified that the ancestors were unhappy. They were not lobbying the Lord Di on the king’s behalf, and were even sending down curses: they needed to be placated with more worship and offerings.

In such cases, the king wanted to know which ancestors were unhappy, and for what reasons, for example: “Is there a curse? Does the deceased Chin-wu desire

BOX 9.1 Oracle Bones and Chinese Writing

The questions and answers of oracle bone divination were recorded on the turtle plastrons, using China's most ancient pictographic script. Over 200,000 such inscriptions have been uncovered by archaeologists, providing us with a precious record of the life and culture of ancient China. Over the centuries, the oracle bone characters evolved into modern Chinese characters, in which it is possible to uncover the original religious meanings. For example, the original form of the character *zun* (see figure 9.1, *right*) shows a bottle of liquor being held up by two hands, as a sacrificial offering to the spirits; the modern form (*left*) means, more broadly, "to honor, to respect."



FIGURE 9.1 *Etymology of the Chinese character zun (to honor, to respect): oracle bone form (right) and modern form (left).*

something of the king?" He also wanted to know if they would support him in his plans, for example, for a military attack on an enemy army. The king and his priests tried to find answers to these questions through a process called "oracle bone divination." A priest would stab a burning stick into a hole drilled in the dried plastron of a turtle or a cow's bone, making it crack. The fissures were then interpreted by the priests as the ancestors' answers to the questions, usually formulated as *yes* or *no*, *auspicious* or *inauspicious*. Though many diviners assisted him, the king himself was the supreme priest and mediator with the ancestors.

The Shang kings' relationship with their ancestors thus followed the same pattern as their relations with their subjects: a relationship of reciprocity and mutual obligation, in which subjects accorded honor, reverence, and gifts of tribute to their ruler, and in exchange, the ruler provided the protection, peace, and security that were the foundation of prosperity. This type of exchange took place in ritualized ceremonies. Through the gestures they made, the clothes they wore, and the types of gifts they gave, the respective ranks of all the actors were made visible and performed in one harmonious order.

Many elements of the Shang sacred regime continued to exist in Chinese culture, politics, and religion until modern times: filial reverence expressed through the veneration of ancestors; techniques of divination used as aids to decide on courses of action; the combined roles of the king as warrior and priest.

Rule by Virtue and the Mandate of Heaven: The Zhou (1122–771 BCE)

Invaders from northwest China, the Zhou overthrew the Shang kings. Although they had successfully defeated the Shang, their ancestors were not among the clans

considered to be able to intercede with Di. How could they legitimize their new power over the realm? Their answer was that the supreme Lord—whom they called *Tian* (meaning “Heaven”)—was so angry with the immoral conduct of the Shang kings, who were oppressing the people, that he had revoked their right to rule (called the “Mandate of Heaven”) and transferred it to the Zhou. *Tian* was a universal god who ruled over the world—“all under heaven”—and who, rather than being surrounded by the ancestors of the different noble clans, could be directly approached and sacrificed to, but by one person only: the king, who styled himself “Son of Heaven.” Ritual worship and sacrifice were necessary but not sufficient, however: to obtain heavenly favor, the king had to conduct himself as a paragon of virtue—otherwise, floods, famines, and earthquakes would occur, the people would become restless, the Mandate of Heaven would be lost, and the dynasty would collapse.

In contrast to the Shang, whose divine legitimacy came from being descendants of a select lineage of privileged ancestors, in the Zhou conception of political legitimacy anyone could theoretically become king, provided he earned the Mandate of Heaven through exemplary virtue; falling into corruption, however, he could also lose the mandate as well. Virtue became fundamental to political legitimacy, bringing heavenly blessings and earthly order and prosperity. Zhou legends extolled the lives of civilizing heroes: Fuxi and his sister/wife Nüwa, for example, were said to have been the only humans to survive a great flood, and introduced the use of fishing nets, the taming of wild animals, and the use of writing. The Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi*), later considered be the ancestor of the Chinese people, was said to have established civilization after an epic battle with the beastly warrior Chiyu. These ancient sage kings were depicted as bringing morality, order, and civilization to a chaotic and savage world.²

Whereas the central principle of political and religious authority among the Shang had been kinship and ancestor worship—which carried with it a logic of fragmentation, since each clan could access spiritual power through worshipping its own ancestors—the Zhou introduced the notion of a universal polity, “all under Heaven,” under the centralized rule of a single emperor who enjoyed exclusive access to Heaven on the basis of his own virtue.

Each locality had its own altar of the soil, for worshipping the earth spirit of that particular spot. This spirit symbolized local power. The Zhou king sent clods of earth from his royal altar of the soil at the capital, and enshrined them in the soil altars of his vassal’s towns. In this way, he acknowledged the local powers symbolized by the soil altars, but also subordinated them to his own power by having his own soil worshipped at each locality’s altar. At the same time, through rituals of investiture, the King delegated rights and responsibilities to his vassals.

The Zhou system thus tried to use ritual means to unify the many localities of China into a single polity. But this principle carried with it a logic of potential revolution and dynastic change, and of disintegration into smaller units: when the emperor’s virtue was contested, he could no longer unify the realm, his dynasty would be deposed, and the forces of localism would break up the empire into feuding regional units.

Kinship-based reverence to ancestors and territorial-based loyalty to virtuous kings and officials would remain in creative tension as alternative idioms of community building and political loyalty throughout much of Chinese history.

Ghosts, Immortality, and *Yin-Yang* Cosmology: The Warring States (771–256 BCE)

In 771 BCE, invasions and unrest led to the collapse of the Zhou social order. For the next 500 years, although the Zhou royal clan continued to be honored, its authority remained merely symbolic, as the realm broke down into hundreds of warring states. Feudal honor, authority through virtue, and solidarity through ritual order were replaced by shifting alliances, blood oaths, treachery, and massacres. Trust broke down, and people assumed that others had evil intentions. They feared not only the living, but the dead as well. The souls of the dead were considered to be bitter and malevolent: if they were not properly taken care of by their living descendants through ancestor veneration, they would become ghosts and return to haunt the living, bringing illness and bad luck. With so many people being killed and displaced in incessant wars, crowds of the hungry ghosts of these forgotten souls were believed to be wandering around the world, seeking revenge. The people called on priests to use exorcistic techniques to frighten the ghosts away.³

Many, particularly among the aristocracy, dreamed of finding a way to avoid dying at all. Legends circulated about extraordinary individuals who had become “immortals” by turning their bodies into a sublime, ethereal substance, purged of all impurities that could lead to rotting and death. Immortals were able to ride on the clouds and were said to live in earthly paradises beyond the oceans of the east, or deep in the Kunlun Mountains to the west. It was said that this bodily transformation could be achieved through secret techniques of diet, meditation, and ascetic techniques, as well as through preparing and ingesting a magical elixir, the pill of immortality (see chapter 5).

With the pervasive uncertainty under the Western Zhou, and much of life subject to unpredictable chance, people were more anxious than ever to discover their fate and know the future through magical divination techniques. Reading the stars (astrology), the forms of the earth (geomancy), the features of the body (physiognomy), and numerological computations became popular forms of prognostication. During these observations, they paid close attention to cycles of time and their association with aspects of geography and human life: day and night, summer and winter, sun and moon. These cycles were associated respectively with light and dark, hot and cold, south and north, going out and coming in, outside and inside, motion and stillness. These sets of opposites were symbolized by the characters *yang*, meaning “the sunny side of a hill,” and *yin*, meaning “the shady side of a hill.”

BOX 9.2 How to Use the *Book of Changes*

Take forty-nine milfoil stalks. After a complicated procedure of repeatedly dividing the stalks and placing them between the fingers of your left and right hand, you get a numerical value of six or nine.

If it is nine, then draw a solid line —, representing *yang*, firmness, movement.

If it is six, then draw a broken line — —, representing *yin*, softness, stillness.

Repeat the operation six times, drawing each additional line on top of the previous one. There are sixty-four possible combinations of solid and broken lines: each is called a *hexagram*. Look up your hexagram in the *Book of Changes*: you will find a symbol representing a direction of change in the universe and a set of cryptic riddles, proverbs, and “judgments” to be used in interpreting the meaning of the hexagram in relation to your situation and question.

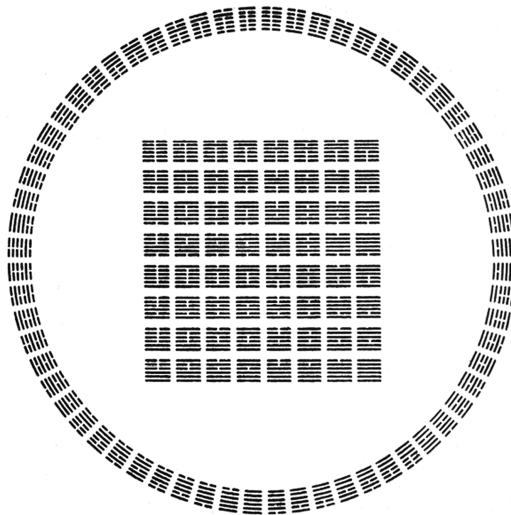


FIGURE 9.2 *The sixty-four hexagrams.*

Yin-yang cosmology was systematized in the *Book of Changes* (also known as the *I Ching*), a divination manual that remains popular until today as one of China’s main classics of cosmology and philosophy, and is also one of the best-known Chinese religious texts in the West.

Harmony, Spontaneity, and Ritual Propriety: Laozi and Confucius

The late Zhou period (403–221 BCE), called the Spring and Autumn Warring States, saw the flourishing of hundreds of schools of thought, as kings, lords, and aristocrats employed all kinds of experts to give them advice in the arts of gover-

nance, military strategy, ritual, medicine, divination, magic, immortality, and so on—perhaps comparable to the professional consultants, management gurus, and spiritual entrepreneurs of today. Thousands of masters competed against one another, traveling from one kingdom to another to provide their services to the rulers, and teaching their knowledge to bands of disciples. Each promoted a specific “way,” or *dao*, as the best path to success in government, warfare, health, or longevity. Although the vast majority of these masters have been forgotten by posterity, two figures would have a profound influence on the religious, social, and political life of future generations of Chinese: Laozi and Confucius.

Little is known about Laozi—his existence is even doubted by some scholars. Legend has it that he was once employed as a court archivist, and one day, riding on the back of a buffalo, set off to disappear in the mountains of the west. On reaching the border post of Louguantai (in present-day Shaanxi), the guard Yin Xi asked him to teach his wisdom. Laozi taught him a collection of 5000 verses, which Yin Xi transcribed onto bamboo slips. These came to be known as the *Daodejing*, the “Book of the Way and Its Virtue,” which would later become a key scripture of the Daoist religion. The book taught that the universe and all creatures and phenomena are generated by an invisible, unnamable, and mysterious power called *Dao* (often rendered in English as *Tao*), the Way. For the ruler, true power could come only from aligning himself with *Dao*, spontaneously following its operation, and not interfering with its movements as expressed through the workings of nature. Rather than imposing rigid laws and moral codes, the ruler, through his natural spontaneity, could induce the free obedience and harmony of the people. The *Daodejing* (Tao Te Ching) stressed following the path of water, which flows to its goal without taking fixed form, and nurturing the generative powers of the feminine. Ostensibly written as a manual for rulers, the *Daodejing* could also be read as a guide for the individual cultivation of *Dao* through practices of the mind and body. Its philosophy of mystic spontaneity and detachment could be invoked to quit the political struggles and the competition for name and fame in this world, and to retreat into the mountains to seek spiritual enlightenment and immortality. But the book’s philosophy could also be understood to mean that the power of a ruler came from his being in tune with *Dao*—and, conversely, that a person truly in tune with *Dao* could be more powerful than the king and could aspire to occupy the throne himself.

Around the same time, Confucius (552–479 BCE) looked with despair at the breakdown of social order around him and yearned for a return to the peace and harmony of the early Zhou. By studying the rites and ceremonies of bygone centuries, he derived a system of principles for the appropriate conduct of human relations. This system was based on the notion of *li*, a term that has many layers of meaning: the ritual offerings given to ancestors and gods; social ceremonies; the respect for proper conventions and norms of hierarchy, and the inner attitude of sincere deference that should accompany the outward expression of respect to other people, to ancestors, or to Heaven. For Confucius, the proper observance of *li* was

the foundation of social life: without *li*, as Confucius and his contemporaries could observe around them, social chaos and corruption would set in.

Although Confucius referred to the sacrificial rites of the early Zhou kings—which were no longer practiced in his own day—Confucius advocated a universal set of moral and social principles, which could be applied by anyone in any situation. The goal was to act with the noble motives and benevolence of a gentleman, rather than following the selfish inclinations of a petty man. Each person should diligently and sincerely play his role in a sacralized social hierarchy: the prince acting with princely virtues, his ministers with appropriate submissiveness, the father with paternal love, his sons with filial reverence, the husband with manly responsibility, his wife with womanly discretion. In such a society, order would spontaneously arise, without the need for harsh impositions of authority.

For Confucius, it was in the family that all of these relationships were grounded, that the proper feelings could be nurtured and the norms of behavior inculcated. It was through filial piety that one gained the experience and practice of *li*—by obeying one's parents when young, by taking care of them when they grew old, by holding a proper funeral for them when they died, and by properly nurturing their souls through ancestor worship.

Confucius stressed the importance of study, and he and his disciples learned and commented on the classics of his day: the *Book of Changes*, the *Rites of the Zhou*, the *Book of Songs*, and other records of history and music. As experts in ritual, they could officiate at religious ceremonies. Their bookishness and deferential manners earned them the title of the “gentle ones.” They would give birth to the Chinese tradition of education and schooling.⁴

Religion and the Political Unification of China: The Qin and Han (221 BC–220 CE)

Confucius wandered from one kingdom to another but found no ruler willing to seriously consider his teachings. In the dog-eat-dog environment of constant warfare among kingdoms, rulers preferred another school of thought—the legalist. This school considered that morality, virtues, and ceremonies were of little import. One should not rule through virtuous example; aristocratic *noblesse oblige* should be replaced by an impersonal, bureaucratic structure of government. The ruler's decrees, and his codes of law, should be enforced through harsh punishments. Respect for ancestors, the Heavenly Lord, or ethics had little place in the legalist scheme.

The state of Qin fully applied the legalist approach and, one by one, ruthlessly conquered all the other kingdoms: China was united, for the first time, into a single empire in 221 BCE. The first emperor, Qin Shihuang, brutally eliminated any source of opposition, unified the Chinese script, and launched the construction of the Great Wall to defend China against tribal invaders from the north. He was also a

deep believer in immortality: he sent magicians to the fabled fairyland of the eastern seas to search for the drug of immortality and, hoping to continue his conquests in the afterlife, had an entire army of life-sized terracotta warriors buried around his tomb, which can be visited today near the city of Xi'an.

But the cruelty of the first emperor's legalist rule could not win over the hearts of the Chinese people. Shortly after his death, revolts erupted, which toppled his short-lived dynasty. A rebel leader, Liu Bang, crowned himself emperor of the new Han dynasty, which lasted for 400 years in relative peace. Although legalism was not abandoned, Han rule was softened and legitimated by the adoption of Confucian and Daoist approaches to government and social organization. The Han synthesis became the paradigm for a unified Chinese civilization for the next 2000 years.

The Han integrated Chinese religion and cosmology into a single system, in which the emperor occupied the central position and pivotal role. All phenomena were classified as either *yin* or *yang* and as expressing one of five cyclic phases symbolized by five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. The human body was conceived as a microcosm of the whole universe. *Yin-yang* and the Five Phases could be used to map movement in both space and time.

In the Han cosmology, everything is seen as interconnected. Cosmic order is characterized by the cyclical alternation of *yin* and *yang* and the orderly succession of the Five Phases, as described in chapter 5. Calamities, wars, epidemics, and natural disasters occur when the cyclical harmony is disrupted. Moral behavior and Confucian propriety were an integral part of the system of correspondences. Man was seen as occupying a central position in the universe—between Heaven (*yang*) and Earth (*yin*), at the junction of *yin* and *yang*, containing within his body all the elements and powers of the cosmos. He also had to respect the *yin* and *yang* positions of authority and submission within the social hierarchy: the ruler is *yang* to the minister's *yin*, the father is *yang* to the son's *yin*, the husband is *yang* to the wife's *yin*. If man's behavior did not conform to the moral principles of the cosmic order, the disruptions could reverberate throughout the cosmos and come back to him in the form of illnesses or bad luck. This was all the more the case for the emperor who, as the supreme man, was the fundamental pivot between Heaven and Earth. As described in one Han text,

[The monarch] holds the position of life and death over men; together with Heaven he holds the power of change and transformation. . . . Therefore the great concern of the ruler lies in diligently watching over and guarding his heart, that his loves and hates, his anger and joy may be displayed in accordance with right, as the mild and cool, the cold and hot weather come forth in proper season. . . . Then may he form a Trinity with Heaven and Earth. . . . Thus may he be called the Equal of Heaven.⁵

This theory legitimized the absolute power of the emperor, who was seen as higher than even most of the gods. But it also required the emperor to act with virtue and benevolence. When calamities and famines occurred, this could mean that the

emperor's corruption was disrupting the cosmic harmony, and that he had lost the Mandate of Heaven—in such circumstances, it was thus legitimate to arise in rebellion. Furthermore, the Five Phases theory assigned each dynasty to a corresponding phase. The Han were Fire and Red. This meant that eventually the cycle would move to the next phase of Earth and Yellow, which would be incarnated by a new dynasty. When would such a change occur? Natural events, such as eclipses, weather patterns, or movements of the stars were often interpreted as omens of imminent changes.

Millenarian Rebellion and the Daoist Heavenly Masters

Such speculations reached a climax in the years approaching 184 CE, which, according to the Chinese calendar, would mark the beginning of a new sixty-year cycle. Intrigues and corruption at the court were rampant, and costly wars against invaders severely taxed the people. Millenarian scriptures and prophecies circulated widely, predicting calamities, famines, pestilence, and floods. Most people would be annihilated. Only a small group would be saved: those who followed the teachings of a “divine man of the great Dao” and his scripture, the *Book of the Great Peace*. This book spelled out a vision of an egalitarian society based on the Dao, in which leaders would live modestly, care for the poor and the elderly, and reduce the taxes of the common people. These ideas inspired an uprising, known as the Yellow Turban Rebellion, led by the charismatic healer Zhang Jue, who conducted mass healing rituals for those who confessed their sins. He quickly attracted a following of hundreds of thousands of rebels in northern China, who were organized in regiments and planned to overthrow the ruling dynasty in 184. After a series of bloody massacres in which thousands were killed, the revolt was crushed. But the insurrection further weakened the Han dynasty, which collapsed a few decades later. Although the Yellow Turban Rebellion failed, it would become the paradigm, always feared by Chinese dynasties and governments, of charismatic millenarian movements turning into armed uprisings, creating social chaos, aiming to topple the ruling house and establish a new dynasty.

At around the same time, another movement arose in western China (in what is now Sichuan and Southern Shaanxi provinces), in which several charismatic healers spread the teachings of the magician Zhang Daoling, who was said to have received revelations from Laozi, ushering in a new cosmic cycle. The movement organized the people into dioceses led by priests, the Heavenly Masters, who held written contracts from the divine hierarchy, empowering them to cast away the demons and protect the people. A bureaucracy of priest-administrators, modeled on the Han civil service, was established and integrated into a wider system of cosmic administration run by a bureaucratic pantheon of gods. Prayers and communications from these gods were presented as written petitions, reports, and standardized forms to fill out. The work of a priest involved, like a clerk, being able to compose

such forms and reports on behalf of the people, and transmit them to the relevant officials in heaven by following the appropriate ritual procedures.

The Heavenly Masters movement only lasted some thirty years, until it was crushed by Han troops. But the Heavenly Masters continued to transmit their tradition: they would become the main religious functionaries of Chinese local temples and community cults—one of the main priestly orders of what came to be known as the Daoist religion.

The Spread of Buddhism

After the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 BCE, for 400 years China was divided into small kingdoms and short-lived dynasties, several of which were ruled by non-Chinese tribes. Some of these made Daoism into their state religion, whereas others favored Buddhism, which was penetrating China through the Silk Road, from India, by way of Afghanistan, to the desert oases of Central Asia, and from there to western China. In the absence of political unity, the Chinese elites turned away from the this-worldly social concerns of Confucianism, and were drawn to a spiritual concern with the self, whether through Daoist techniques for cultivating long life or immortality, or accumulating Buddhist merits for a better afterlife.

The rapid spread of Buddhism was met with resistance and controversy. Daoists were spurred to strengthen their organization, systematize their teachings, and to claim that Buddha was but a barbarian student of Laozi. The idea of monasticism—in which monks break their ties with their family to devote themselves exclusively to spiritual salvation—was seen as an affront to the sacred notions of filial reverence: if a son broke ties with his parents, he would not worship them after their death, and they would become hungry ghosts; by remaining celibate, he would not have sons to care for his own soul, and he would suffer the same ignominious fate.

This tension was expressed and solved through mythical narratives, such as the story of Miaoshan recounted in chapter 6. There was also the story of Mulian, a disciple of Buddha, who travels through the underworld in search of his mother, meeting countless ghosts and masters along the way. Finally, in the most frightening of all hells, he finds his mother impaled on a bed of nails, as punishment for not giving alms to a mendicant monk. By conducting rituals of salvation, calling on the merit of the faithful, and appealing to the Buddha himself, Mulian rescues his mother from hell and leads her to rebirth in paradise. This story showed how, by accumulating Buddhist merit, a monk could do more to save the souls of his parents than worshipping them as ancestors. Indeed, Buddhist monks came to be seen as specialists in the salvation of the souls of the dead—capable of saving not only their own ancestors, but the souls of all sentient beings. They thus became the main providers of funeral rites. Mulian's story was often ritually performed during the mid-summer Ghost Festival (during the seventh lunar month) dedicated to the collective salvation of all wandering souls and hungry ghosts who, because they had no sons

to worship them, or had died an unnatural death, were not taken care of through the ancestor cult.

In contrast to the vertical ethics of the Confucians, which stressed reverence of one's parents and loyalty to one's ruler, Buddhism advocated a more horizontal, universal ethics: good deeds would lead to a better rebirth in the next life; such merit-accumulating good deeds could be carried out for the benefit of others besides one's own kin or ruler. Popular forms of meritorious deeds included giving alms to monks, making donations to build or repair a temple, contributing funds to print religious literature to be distributed for free, and doing charitable works for the poor and destitute. Enjoying the generous donations of their wealthy patrons, many Buddhist monasteries became powerful institutions, their leaders going so far as refusing to bow down in submission to the emperor, on the grounds that they were not subject to his this-worldly authority.

Religion, Commerce, and Markets in the Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279)

In 618, China was once again reunited under the Tang, whose emperors claimed to be descendants of Laozi, thus fulfilling millenarian prophecies about the advent of a Daoist messiah. The Tang dynasty is typically considered to represent the apex of Chinese civilization, a time when arts, literature, and the economy flourished. Traders of many nationalities and religions, including Muslims and East Syrian Christians, came and went along the Silk Road, and even served the government as officials. The Tang empire's influence radiated into Tibet, Central Asia, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Both Daoism and Buddhism enjoyed unprecedented wealth, power, and influence under imperial patronage. But the emperor was displeased with the power of the Buddhist clergy and its immense tax-free landholdings. In 845, he decreed a severe repression of Buddhism—more than 4600 monasteries and 40,000 temples and shrines were destroyed. Buddhist institutions never fully recovered, remaining weak until today.

The preeminence of Buddhism was gradually eclipsed by a resurgent Confucianism, which had absorbed the metaphysical aspects of Daoist and Buddhist philosophy. In the Song dynasty (969–1279), the imperial state expanded its powers and implemented a meritocratic system for recruiting officials by requiring candidates to pass examinations based on the Confucian classics. The state bureaucracy was mirrored by a celestial administration: the emperor gave himself the prerogative to promote and demote gods in the heavenly hierarchy. Although the imperial state maintained a policy of the harmony of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism), government administration was firmly in the hands of the Confucians, who succeeded in restricting the influence of Buddhist and Daoist institutions, and reinforced ancestor worship among the population. In

South China, clans of kinsmen organized themselves into large corporate groupings, which built grand lineage halls to worship their common ancestors, and established schools to educate their children in the Confucian classics in order to prepare them for the imperial examinations.

This was a period of rapid commercial expansion, technological innovation, and proto-industrial development. Market cities flourished along trade routes—deeply impressing Marco Polo, the traveler from Venice, who had never seen such large and prosperous cities in his native medieval Europe. Merchants and producers organized themselves into guilds, which worshipped a common patron saint, built temples, and sponsored festivals. The main shrine in each city, the city god temple, was also a central public square and marketplace, and a place where business deals were sealed by making oaths before the god. Buddhist and Daoist priests, as well as fortune-tellers and mediums, offered their services to clients for a fee, acting as independent consultants.

Money was ubiquitous, and the logic of cash transactions penetrated popular religious life. Offerings to ancestors included special paper money, sent to the otherworld by burning it, which they could use to bribe the officials of hell and purchase whatever they needed, as well as to repay debts to gods. Sins and good deeds were recorded in accounting books—the “ledgers of merits and demerits”—by pious individuals who hoped to maintain a “positive balance” each day. One of the most popular gods was the god of wealth, who was prayed to for material prosperity. Confucian morality and the market culture fused into an ethic that claimed that moral behavior would lead to all-around prosperity: happiness, talented and healthy (male) offspring, higher social rank, and material wealth (see chapter 12). Conversely, prosperity was seen as a sign of virtue: something that the wealthy could demonstrate through charitable deeds like building roads and bridges and, especially, by funding the building and expansion of temples where the people could pray for blessings.⁶

Literacy became more widespread, and more people sought personal spiritual growth by reading scriptures and morality books, and by practicing meditation and body cultivation regimens. Many groups engaged in charitable deeds, building the benevolent halls described in chapter 8. Several lay religious movements emerged, which provided organized outlets for this popular spirituality: in Pure Land Buddhism, for example, one could attain salvation by repeatedly reciting the name of the Amitabha Buddha. Complete Perfection Daoism systematized the practice of inner alchemical meditation (it later adopted monastic forms derived from Buddhism, becoming the dominant institution of Daoism). The White Lotus movement gathered congregations of laypeople to recite Buddhist scriptures. Some groups, which worshipped a goddess called the Unborn Mother (see chapter 6), revived millenarian expectations with prophecies about the advent of the Maitreya Buddha. Some of these groups were associated with rebellions. The imperial state tried to stamp them out, but they continued to grow.

The Emperor as an Actor in Religious Conflicts: Tibetan Buddhism and Roman Catholicism in Late Imperial Times (1279–1911)

Indeed, the throne positioned itself as the ultimate authority and arbiter in religious issues—promoting and demoting gods in the pantheon, and supporting or banning religious sects and communities. Under constant state control and interference, indigenous religious institutions were permanently weakened. In the Yuan (1279–1368), the Ming (1368–1644), and the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, the emperor became involved with the much more powerful and assertive religious institutions of Tibetan Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. Tibetan Buddhism was the religion of the borderland peoples of Tibet, Mongolia, and Manchuria, who were divided into several competing sects, often at war with one another, and under shifting relationships with the Chinese empire and its rulers. In order to secure the loyalty of those people, the emperor patronized Tibetan Buddhism and some of its religious leaders, often supporting one sect over another in order to advance imperial interests. During the Mongol Yuan dynasty, the emperor Kublai Khan, having been snubbed by the head of the Black Hat sect, established ties with the head of the Sakya sect, the Phagpa Lama, who recognized Kublai as the supreme sovereign in political affairs, while Kublai recognized the Lama as his master in spiritual affairs. In the early Ming, the Chinese emperors favored another line of lamas, the Karmapas, inviting them to officiate at solemn rites at the capital. By the mid-seventeenth century, the head of the Gelupka or Yellow Hat sect, the Dalai Lama, through an alliance with a Mongol prince, defeated the rival Red Hat sect and became the preeminent religious figure in Tibet and Mongolia, with supreme political authority as well in Tibet. The newly established Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty, hoping to enhance their influence over Tibet and Mongolia, established alliances with the Dalai Lama. Lamas were believed to be reincarnated divinities; after they died, a search was conducted for a child who would be recognized as his reincarnation. Owing to the political and religious influence of the Dalai Lama, these searches were fraught with political intrigues in which the Qing empire and competing Tibetan cliques often had a hand. Rival factions assassinated several young reincarnate Dalai Lamas. By the eighteenth century, representatives of the Qing state, which was at the height of its power, played a direct role in the process of selecting reincarnations of Dalai Lamas.

In the late sixteenth century, when Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries first came to China, they found a powerful, flourishing civilization that firmly saw itself as the center of the world, with nothing to learn from foreign barbarians. The Jesuits, led by Matteo Ricci, were quite impressed, and realized that if they were to make any inroads in China, they would need to fully understand Chinese culture. So they learned the Chinese classics, dressed as Confucian scholars, and engaged in philosophical debates with the Chinese literati. They tried to demonstrate their superiority by showing examples of the latest advances in Western science, in astronomy, optics, hydraulics, and perspective drawing. They enjoyed a measure of

success, and by the seventeenth century, missionaries worked for the imperial court, as tutors for the young emperor, Kang Xi, as astronomers, and as landscape designers. They wrote many reports and books about China, which were widely read in Europe and had a deep influence on Enlightenment philosophers such as Leibniz and Voltaire. Their idealized descriptions of the Chinese civil service, made up of philosophers, chosen through impartial examinations, who administered the nation by implementing the rational teachings of Confucius, contrasted sharply with the prevailing European monarchies, where official positions were inherited by incompetent noblemen or purchased by ambitious businessmen. Impressed that Confucian virtues were so similar to Christian values, the Jesuits considered that Confucianism was an ethical philosophy, not a religion, and therefore, that one could join the Catholic Church and practice Confucian morality at the same time, and even continue to honor one's ancestors according to traditional Chinese rites. Others in the Catholic Church did not share this point of view. Heated debates, known as the "Chinese rites controversy," ensued in Europe. In the end, Pope Clement XI ruled in 1715 against the Jesuits and supported an exclusivist definition of Catholicism. This led to the Chinese emperor, Yongzheng, banning the Catholic Church in China, in 1721—for in his eyes, it was the Chinese emperor, as the Son of Heaven, who had the final authority in religious matters, and not a foreign pope.

Christianity and the Beginnings of Chinese Modernity: The Collapse of the Traditional Order (1839–1911)

By the first decades of the nineteenth century, corruption and incompetence were weakening the Chinese polity, while the Western powers, enjoying a newfound military and economic supremacy, did not hesitate to use guns to open the Chinese market. After the Opium War (1839–1842), in which Britain forced China to allow imports of opium from British India, China was obliged to sign a series of "unequal treaties" with the Western powers and Japan, which gave special rights to foreign nationals—rights which, notably, extended to Catholic and Protestant missionaries. Christian proselytism, in contrast to the Jesuit approach a few centuries earlier, was now more aggressive and far less accommodating to Chinese culture. And when conflicts occurred between Christians and nonbelievers, the Chinese authorities were required by the "unequal treaties" to protect Christian interests. Many Chinese, who came to view Christianity as a tool of Western imperialism, viewed this as a humiliation and as cultural aggression.

Two major rebellions in the second half of the nineteenth century, which can be seen as vastly diverging religious reactions to the introduction of Christianity and to the presence of the West, contributed to the weakening and eventual collapse of the Qing empire. The first was the Taiping movement, which caused what was probably the bloodiest civil war in the history of humanity, with an estimated thirty to fifty million casualties.⁷ It is best understood as a confluence of the

Chinese tradition of millenarian rebellion and Christian messianism. The leader, an unaccomplished Hakka scholar, Hong Xiuquan (1812–1864), was exposed in 1836 to Protestant tracts, which led him to reinterpret earlier visions as a revelation that he was in fact Christ's younger brother. He then founded a "God-worshipping society" and smashed the deity statues in local temples. He organized disenfranchised Hakka laborers into a utopian society in the Guangxi highlands and, with the help of other visionaries acting as spirit mediums possessed by members of a wildly expanded holy family, directed the group as an army bent on toppling the Qing regime and establishing a puritan paradise on earth. Although it failed to conquer Beijing, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom held on to its capital in Nanjing from 1851 to 1864, causing untold destruction. Although the Taiping were, in the end, thoroughly crushed, and completely disappeared as a religious movement, they can be said to represent the irruption of modernity into Chinese religious history, combining for the first time, and in a bloody blast, three elements that would, throughout the next century, never cease to interact with explosive consequences: apocalyptic revolution, Christian influence, and communistic utopianism. The latter aspect could be seen in Taiping doctrines advocating the abolition of private land property, the equitable distribution of land and surplus produce, the equality of men and women and a ban on foot binding, the use of vernacular language and punctuation, and the hierarchical organization of society in nested units of twenty-five families fully integrating religious, civil, and military functions. Prefiguring many elements of Chinese modernism, socialism, and Maoism, these ideals would inspire future generations of Chinese revolutionaries, including Sun Yat-sen, while the Chinese Communist Party would claim an explicit filiation to the movement.

A few decades later, at the turn of the twentieth century, another rebellion erupted, this time centered in north China, led by the "Righteous and Harmonious Society," labeled "Boxers" by contemporary Western observers. The Boxers were a type of self-defense village militia who practiced martial arts along with possession cults that were believed to provide magical invulnerability: they believed that, after practicing the appropriate rituals and using the right spells, they could repel the bullets of Western guns. Whereas such groups normally limited their activities to the village level, a chain of events in the years 1899 and 1900 caused them to spread and unite through northern China (particularly in Shandong and Hebei provinces), and attack Westerners and Christians, seen as the cause of all problems in a rapidly impoverishing and state-neglected countryside. They mobilized much of the unemployed population, obtained the support of a large part of the local elites, killed missionaries and Chinese Christians, and took control of the cities, including Beijing. The Empress Dowager Cixi officially sided with them and declared war on Western powers. This provoked a crushing military retaliation by the allied forces. The Boxer rebellion was a revolt, through local religious culture, against Western power and its churches, in which the rebels hoped to compensate for their material weakness through recourse to magic. In the end, the humiliating defeat, with its heavy human, political, and financial costs, convinced China's political elites that Chinese religion,

out of which the Boxers had emerged, was a tangle of superstitions, a major hindrance to progress, and a threat to China's survival. If China wanted to be a strong and modern nation, they concluded, it would have to cleanse itself of her traditions and build a fully secular state on the foundations of Western science.

Paradoxically, the missionaries also introduced Western science through the schools and colleges they began to establish in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁸ The Taiping and Boxer movements notwithstanding, the missionaries established churches and church institutions during this period that were to have a significant impact on Chinese society and cultural exchange between China and the West. Protestant and Catholic missionaries built schools, colleges, and hospitals that were to endure through the middle of the next century. Protestant missionaries also became advocates for social reform, promoting causes such as the education of women, the end of the opium trade, and democratic change. The churches the missionaries established also attracted an increasing number of Chinese Christian converts, and their numbers would grow in the twentieth century. The missionary presence was maintained through the influence of the Western powers, but at the same time, Christianity began to establish indigenous roots in China.

Notes

1. David Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 1–2 (quotation simplified for readability).

2. See Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), and K. C. (Kwang-chih) Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

3. See Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

4. See Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

5. Dong, Zhongshu, *Chunqiu fanlü*, in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, trans. Wm. Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). Quoted in Julia Ching, *Mysticism and Kingship in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 105.

6. Edward L. Davis, *Society and the Supernatural in Song China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); Richard John Lufrano, *Honorable Merchants: Commerce and Self-Cultivation in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997); Richard Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

7. On the Taiping rebellion, see Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: Norton, 1996).

8. See Ryan Dunch, "Science, Religion and the Classics in Christian Higher Education to 1920," in *China's Christian Colleges: Cross-Cultural Connections, 1900–1950* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009) 57–82.