

FEATURE

China

Introduction (Part II) to the Book, China

By Hong-Yee Chiu

This book is divided into four major segments. While the last part deals with the main theme of this book, the purpose of the first three parts is to set the proper backdrop. Although discussions are centered on China, stress is placed on the differences with the West.

I. The Beginning of Chinese Philosophical Thoughts

Part one of four discusses the development of Chinese philosophical thought and the divergence—chiefly on the theme of religion—from those of the West. Chapter 1 opens with an encounter between the earliest and arguably greatest ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Zi (also known as Lao Tsu) with a humble gatekeeper. The book recounts their conversations, including a cursory discussion of the first text on Chinese philosophy, *Yi-jing* (commonly known in the West as *I-Ching*). Among the central ideas of *I-Ching* are the cyclic and ever changing nature of the Universe and the merits of laissez-faire in human affairs. Lao Zi was profoundly influenced by *I-Ching* and his philosophy of laissez-faire dominated the early Han Dynasty for over one hundred years. He formulated the first mathematical concept of naught (zero, nothingness), and as an atheist, he formulated a theory of the creation of the Universe out of nothingness, a theory that does not contradict the views of modern cosmologists. His thoughts profoundly influenced Confucius, who was an agnostic. Both were humanists who placed human values above all.

Chapter two continues along this line as it discusses the background which led to the official sanction of the Confucian philosophy in 134 BC. A comparison with the First Ecumenical Council is presented.

II. The Development of Religious Thinking in China, Chinese Native Religions, and the Entrance of Foreign Religions into China

Upon venturing into Part two, the text further explores the development of religious

consciousness in China along with similar aspects in the West. Three themes are expounded on: the Chinese versus the Western version of a great flood, the concept of a Master of the Universe, and native and imported religions in China.

Floods

One of the cornerstones of Christian history is the account of Noah's flood in the Old Testament. Few in the West realized that floods also marked an important period in ancient China, around 2500-2000 BC. However, the cultural outcome of the floods in the East and the West took two unique paths.

First examining the Chinese case, there was a detailed description of the Chinese floods in the first and somewhat legendary annals of history, *Shang Shu* (*Book of Ancient History*). According to tradition, the floods were harnessed by a great folk hero Yu the Great, who also founded the earliest dynasty, Xia. The official history of Xia was lost and doubts arose about this legendary hero. In 1995, the Chinese government commenced an immense five-year project to determine the dates of the earliest three known Chinese dynasties: the Xia (2071-1600 BC), the Shang (1600-1046 BC), and the Zhou (1046-nominally 221 BC). This research firmly established the existence of the Xia Dynasty as well as the authenticity of Yu the Great. The Chinese floods did not give rise to religion but taught Chinese the lesson that humans could harness nature.

In the Western Christian world, Noah's flood was reputedly one of the most important historical events in early human history. According to the Old Testament, a flood that covered the *entire earth* came within days and

receded forty days later. Scientifically speaking, it is *impossible* to have a flood of this magnitude that came and receded within such a short time. (Further, there is just not enough water on the earth, now or then, to cover the entire earth, up to the tip of the Himalayas.) However, this myth persists in many Indo-European civilizations. During the early nineteenth century, when modern geology was in a nascent state, geological research aimed to uncover the truth about this flood. With the discovery of the Ice Age cycle, this problem was set aside until recently. In 1990, geologists discovered that there is a plausible scientific explanation for the flood, the flooding of the Black Sea, which occurred 7,500 years ago near the end of the recent Ice Age. This flooding raised the level of the Black Sea by some 500 feet. The rapidly rising sea level gave residents along the fertile and warm shorelines an impression that the entire world was about to become flooded. As they fled, they brought the flood story with them, mystified by oral poets, and this event eventually became legend in many Indo-European civilizations.

The nature of the Chinese floods and the Black Sea flood (Noah's flood) were different. The Chinese floods were river floods, which could be harnessed. The Black Sea flood was a gargantuan natural disaster, and probably could not be stopped even in our time. Nevertheless, similar natural disasters in two civilizations led to two different outcomes—in one case, the confidence in the power of humans, and in the other, religion.



The Master of the Universe.

All early civilizations invoked the concept of a master of the Universe and this

concept created religion. However, the Chinese concept the master of the Universe is drastically different from that in the West (and many other religions). While in the West the master has always been God, in China this master is a vague and rather abstract form of heaven, called *Tian* (the literal meaning is "the firmament" or "heaven"). However, Chinese beliefs propose that *Tian* does not interact directly with the human world. Instead, human affairs and events in nature are controlled by specific gods and goddesses who are under the direct auspices of *Tian*. (In this sense, Chinese religious beliefs are more close to monotheism than to polytheism.) Prayers have always been directed to these deities instead of to *Tian*. Yet *Tian* does receive its share of worship during special occasions. In addition, there had never been any bible or sutra attributed to *Tian*. In the West, God is considered to take direct charge of human affairs and the Bible represents the words of God. Indeed, the differences between God and *Tian* outnumber their similarities.

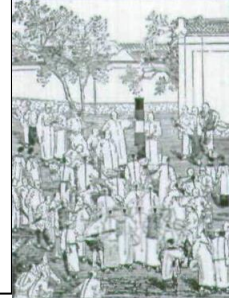
Tian has a special role in politics: ruling emperors were supposed to have received mandates from *Tian* to rule (hence, the emperor was called the Son of *Tian* or the Son of Heaven). However, this mandate could be revoked if the king carried out evil deeds against the people. When the founding king of the Zhou Dynasty began a campaign to overthrow the evil and the last king of the Shang Dynasty, Zh'ou, in his war command he wrote, "Tian does not help only one family." This statement ruled out the concept of *divine rule* and set the stage for many dynasty overthrows ever since.



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By putting *Tian* above all deities, including the Western God, the Chinese could accept all religions without discrimination. The trouble came when Christian missionaries insisted the supremacy of God, causing a ban of Christianity in China for over 100 years prior to 1842.

Native Chinese Religion and Imported Religions.

During China's long span of history, many religions took root, the first being Buddhism, which exerted profound influences in the development of Chinese civilization, including the language and literary styles. Nevertheless, there had been four major occasions when Buddhism (among other religions) was suppressed, during which many temples were closed and their properties confiscated, and the monks and nuns were forced to return to civilian lives. However, the reasons for suppression were not ideological but economical.

There were too many monks and nuns in equally numerous temples enjoying tax exemption, and in the case of monks, exemptions from civil and military obligations. However, a fair number of temples—with their proven pious monks and nuns—were spared and allowed to continue operating. During the import of Buddhism, Chinese invented Taoism, an offshoot from Buddhism. Many other religions, such as Nestorian, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and even Judaism, also entered China at one time or another. They were well received and some ruling emperors even financed the construction of their temples. Most imported religions eventually declined (except Islam) due to a number of reasons not associated with religious suppressions.

Among all religions that entered China, Christianity was by far the most controversial. It entered China near the end of fifteenth century and was well received by the ruling emperors. The Jesuits were the first comers. The Jesuits permitted the traditional Chinese worship of ancestors and Confucius. However, other rival Orders successfully persuaded the Vatican to ban this practice among Chinese Christians. This was known as the Controversy of Rites (in 1938, however, the Vatican rescinded this ban). As a result, Christianity was officially forbidden until 1842, when Britain defeated China in the infamous Opium War and China was forced to grant Christian missionaries reentrance. However, after the Opium War in 1842 until the early part of the twentieth century, Christianity had essentially become a tool of aggression used by Western powers to usurp China (largely Britain, France, and Germany, with the United States taking a minor part; the aggressive acts of Japan comprised of no religious elements). The current Chinese policy against foreign missionaries seems to have roots stemmed from the rampant actions of oppression by some Christian missionaries against the Chinese people during that period.

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He established the theoretical foundation of the formation of neutron stars in and the crucial neutrino processes in supernova explosions (1964). He coined the word "quasar" (1963).