An Introduction to Ancient Chinese Religion

Since the earliest times religion has played an important part to play in the lives of mankind; it has helped to morally and consciously guide people in their lives, it has comforted them in hardships and explained the world around them. The civilization of China, one of the most ancient and sophisticated ever to have existed, have, for more than 3,000 years, been trying to give a meaning and purpose to the Chinese people’s existence on this earth.

It is this urge to present an explanation, to justify the otherwise random workings of nature and history, which has given rise to the religions in this country. The myths and legends that rose reflected their concerns and beliefs; for example, myths about controlling floods reflect the constant anxieties of a farming people whose livelihoods depended on guiding the flow of rivers to irrigate their paddy fields.

The most famous of eastern religions, Buddhism, was introduced into China by traders and missionaries from India, Nepal and Central Asia who were travelling along the Silk Road during the 1st century BCE. At this time, two other religions, or schools of thought, were already recognized in China. These were Confucianism and Taoism.

Confucianism is named after its founder Kongfuzi, otherwise known as Master Kong (551 – 479 BCE), who lived in the period known as The Warring States. He had spent a lifetime trying to persuade the rulers of smaller states and the nobles to implement his ideas on ethics and morals but with very little success. After his death, his thoughts were collected by his disciples and published. However, it was not until the Han Dynasty that Confucianism became the dominant religion of the ancient Chinese people.

The ideology of Confucianism believes in an extremely structured, hierarchical institution within society in which the family was the foundation of social consistency. If one was aware of one’s responsibilities and carried out one’s duties correctly, then a state of harmony could be achieved. Filial piety was one of the most important virtues in Confucianism and the reverence of those individuals who had reached old age guaranteed that the extended family remained closely bound.

In this ideology, sacrifices played a vital part. By carrying out these sacrifices, the individual was reminded of their place in the grand scheme of things as well as ensuring that one’s ancestors were happy. At the state level, sacrifices made by the emperor were performed annually to Heaven and Earth. The philosophy of Master Kong cannot be defined, by modern standards, as a religion as it lacks the many features of what scholars identify as a religion, such as a priesthood, but nevertheless, this ideology had a deep impact on both the ancient and the modern Chinese people.

Taoism was another religion that emerged around the same time as Confucianism. One of the earliest texts, the Tao Te Ching, was written by the Taoist sage Laozi sometime around the 6th century BCE. According to the Taoists, this ideology believes that there is a natural order in the world which determines the behaviour of all things in existence.

By studying the natural world, early Taoist scholars believed that they could discover the fundamental laws of nature. It was studying the nature of the spirit of things, particularly at naturally occurring phenomena like water or wind that led to the beginning of science in China.

As time passed, Taoism evolved into a belief system that became more popular. Inanimate objects were seen to have their own ‘spirit’ or ‘god’ and this gave rise to a structure of worship intended to propitiate these powers which was distant from that of the early Taoist principles.

One of the most famous arts came out of Taoism – the art of fengshui (wind and water). This is a method of positioning of buildings (and the objects within) in order not to offend the spirit of the site. This practice is still being used today, not only in China but in countries in the west as well.

Buddhism was introduced into China around the 1st century BCE and became a major religion in Chinese history. Buddhism offered an important contribution into ancient Chinese life – the notion of the transmigration of souls. This belief in reincarnation - that souls returned to the world in the form determined by the actions during their preceding incarnation – offered great comfort to those who might have felt that their current life left something to be desired.

After death, the individual arrives in the Underworld and stands before Yen Wang, who examines the register recording all good and evil deeds. People who have led good lives (for example, filial sons or believers) are able to go directly to join Buddha, or go to the home of the Immortals, Mount Kunlun, or even to be reborn immediately as a human being. If an individual had committed evil deeds in their lifetime, they were judged before one of nine judges who dealt out the punishment appropriate to the offenses they had committed.

The saying “Confucian in office, Taoist in retirement and Buddhist as death draws near” sums up the practical Chinese approach to religion. The ancient Chinese people have never required a distinct separation of the worlds of myth and reality (a tangled knot which takes a long time to unravel) – indeed, myth and reality are so closely bound together that it is hard to say where one begins and the other ends. Due to this, historical figures are made into gods and myths are recounted as history. Despite this, the religions of ancient China draws us into a fascinating and delightful realm.